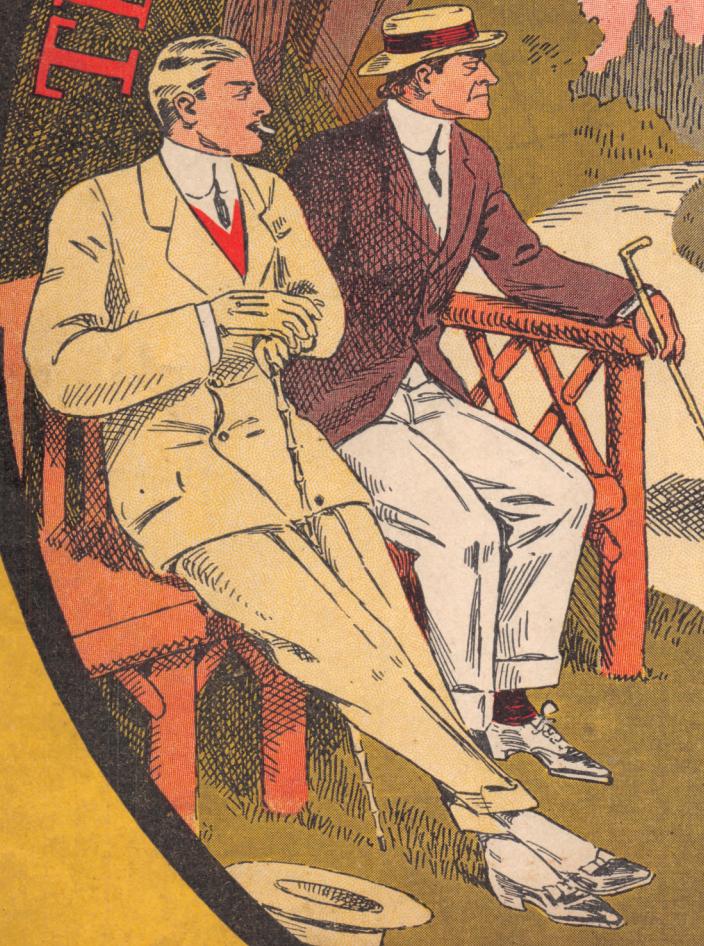


OLD SLEUTH WEEKLY

NO. 71

Price 5 cents

The OMNIPRESENT AVENGER



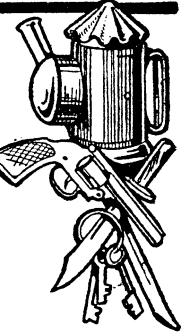
by
"OLD
SLEUTH"

..The
ARTHUR WESTBROOK
Company
CLEVELAND
U. S. A.





OLD SLEUTH WEEKLY



A Series of

THE MOST THRILLING DETECTIVE STORIES EVER PUBLISHED

No. 71.

THE ARTHUR WESTBROOK COMPANY, CLEVELAND, U. S. A.

Vol. II.

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The Omnipresent Avenger

BEING THE CONTINUATION OF
“ON THEIR TRACK”

By

“OLD SLEUTH.”

CHAPTER I.

THE young man was acting under instructions. He had been told to watch an opportunity for getting in the very conversation we have recorded.

There was a cold-blooded smile on the face of the dealer as he said:

“All right.”

“I’ve come fixed to-night,” said Madison.

“That’s all right.”

“When I catch you I’ll catch you heavy.”

“Go in!”

“I’ve been told this was not a square game.”

The dealer laughed.

“I’ll test it to-night.”

“You shall have all you win.”

The game proceeded, and the cards in one deal were nearly run out, when the man with the red rose in his button-hole said, in a low tone:

“I like that card.”

He placed a small bet upon it.

“I like that card, too,” said Madison, and he laid a pile of chips on it.

The man with a red rose immediately changed his bet. The young man was a little disconcerted, as he had not been warned as to the latter move; but he let his money rest on the card, and soon put on a larger sum, and kept adding until he had at least two thousand dollars on the card, and it won.

The dealer turned pale, but he paid the bet. There are contingencies even in a cheating game where a square deal must be made, and it was evident that the man with the red rose in his button-hole had ciphered down until he had the dealer on a “spot.”

As Madison removed his winnings, he said:

“Aha! I’ve waited for it. Luck is changed. I felt it in my bones. I’ll win to-night, I tell you—I’ll break the bank!”

“Go in, young man; the bank is here to win or lose.”

“It’s lose to-night. I’m dead set for you! I’ve come fixed.”

“That’s right. But if you get worsted don’t squeal.”

“I won’t squeal.”

“You have a chance to pull out of the game now that you are ahead.”

“Have I?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you have a chance to close the bank.”

“The bank is open as long as there is a dollar left to cover a card.”

“That’s all right, so don’t squeal when I ‘pull’ your last dollar.”

Madison’s three next plays were against him, and the smile on the dealer’s face brightened. It is a fact that the man was really scared. There was something in the air—something he did not understand. He did not mind the talky player, Swayne, but he did appear to fear or be uncomfortable as concerned the three silent players.

The game proceeded, and at length the dude said:

“I like that card.”

He put a good bet on the card he liked. The young man did not immediately follow the lead. He waited, and the man with the red rose changed his bet, and then Madison put a large amount on the card. When he did so the dude changed back and made his bet on the same card. A slight pallor overspread the dealer’s face, and the bank-owner stood near with an anxious look in his eyes. There was a sort of mystic consciousness floating in the air that something was up.

The other players, one after another, went to the same card, and Madison went on it heavily. The dealer drew his cards slowly, and his hand trembled, although he was a man of iron nerve.

The fatal card came up at last. It was a mislead. All the players had lost, and the bank had made a big haul.

The dealer involuntarily heaved a sigh. It had been a very tight squeeze.

Madison had lost twenty-five hundred dollars on the card, and in a derisive tone the dealer said:

“Don’t get discouraged, sonny.”

“I am not discouraged. You can close the bank if you choose; otherwise I stick until you get me, or I you.”

“The bank is open for three hours, unless sooner broken.”

“That is your decision?”

“That is business with us.”

“All right; I’ll stay with you as long as I have a dollar, and I’ll leave all I have here when I go, or I’ll take yours along with me.”

“Remember, young man, we warn you.”

"Oh, that's all right!"

"The percentage is against you."

"I calculate that."

"No one asks you to play; it's an open game, and if you play, you can blame no one but yourself."

"I am much obliged, but I'm forming my own good judgment."

"As you please."

"I tell you luck will come to me. I'm bound to break you."

The remarks of the youth were in a bantering tone. The dealer, however, had spoken with sober earnestness. He had reached the conclusion that the young man had come there in a desperate mood. Of course he well knew morally that the youth was not playing his own money, and he was preparing for retreat in his words of advice. He knew well enough the young man would stick to the play as long as a dollar remained in his possession.

The game proceeded. An hour passed, during which time several of the players refreshed themselves, but the young man did not stop to eat or drink. He appeared to be possessed. The man with the red rose in his button-hole also stuck steadily to the game, and said nothing. Indeed, he had hardly opened his mouth twice during the whole evening.

At length once again came the signal:

"I like that card."

He put his money on it, and Madison followed with the remark:

"I'll try it again."

"Don't follow me, my friend," said the dude, "I'm an experimenter."

"It's an open game."

"Yes."

"I like the card."

The youth put on his money and the dude changed his bet. The dealer meantime with his shrewd keen eyes glanced at both men. There was something up, as he appeared to suspect. There are no keener judges of human nature in one direction than gamblers and bar-tenders; they read men with remarkable accuracy.

Madison having once bet, went on the card heavily, and as the deal proceeded he kept increasing his bet, until he had three thousand five hundred dollars on the one card.

There prevailed a death-like stillness; the dealer's face, despite his strong nerve, assumed an ashen hue, while the young bettor was as cool and unconcerned as well-simulated desperation could make him appear.

The man with the rose in his button-hole did not come back to the card he had selected, and afterward deserted when his bet was followed.

There prevailed, as stated, a dead silence. The dealer slid the cards slowly, and at length the fatal card came. The bank had lost, the desperate young bettor had won.

"Aha, I knew I'd yet close your bank or your game!"

"Play as long as you please, bub, but no remarks."

"Now don't get mad. I've dropped enough here at different times to enjoy a good winning."

"You're welcome. But I object to your remarks."

"I'm going to break you."

"Are you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, get in; we're here to break or be broken, when a man seeks it."

CHAPTER II.

MADISON merely laughed in a reckless and boyish manner as he responded:

"I am here to break you."

"You're rash, young man."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"All right; I've taken the contract."

"You talk too much."

"Do I?"

"Yes; and I will have to order you out of the game if you don't talk less. There are other players in the game."

"That's all right."

The game proceeded, and the young man played very cautiously; but after awhile he caught the eye of the dude. The latter passed him a meaning glance. The youth was very quick-witted, and took it that he was yet a point ahead. He

appeared very indifferent, but was on the alert. He saw the dude make a feint to cover a card. Just as a bird makes a feint sometimes to light on a branch, and then sails on, so did the dude. He went over the card, and after an instant called in all his bets. Madison, meantime, thought he discerned the hint, and he put his money on the card where the dude had made a feint.

The game proceeded, and the youth kept increasing his bet. The stillness was oppressive. Indeed, as the youth kept on adding to his bet and increasing his stakes, the other players seemingly became too deeply interested to bet themselves, and the interest was centered on the one bet. The youth caught the eye of the man with the red rose, and there appeared to come a signal, and he laid down more money, until he had seven thousand five hundred dollars on the card. The dealer's face became ashen white, and the owner of the game, who still stood over the table, also showed considerable nervousness. The deal went on; the telling card came, and the youth was a winner. He had caught the bank at one deal for seventy-five hundred dollars, and, taking all his bets together, he was just eleven thousand dollars winner.

"The game is closed," said the dealer, but he made no effort to make good the bet.

"Cover my bet," said Madison.

"That's all right."

"Cover my bet."

"That's all right," came the stereotyped answer.

"Do you mean to cover my bet?"

"Come up here to-morrow and we will settle."

"No, that won't do."

The dude at this point opened his mouth. He said:

"The lad is entitled to his money."

"Are you running this bank?"

"The lad is entitled to his money."

"He'll get it."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"That ain't business."

"What have you to do with it?"

"The lad is entitled to his money."

"He can't have it."

"Why?"

"Do you want to know?"

"Yes."

"It's a put-up job."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"You don't mean to pay?"

"We don't play against a skin-game."

"Oh, you don't?"

"No."

Besides the dealer, there were several men in the gambling-room, and there was a deep pallor on the faces of all save the dude. The latter was as cool as a cucumber, and not a line of his face showed any nervousness. The owner of the bank stood over the table listening to the conversation, and a big, bully-like looking fellow also stood behind the dealer.

"You think it was a skin-game?"

"Yes."

"And you won't pay?"

"No."

"Did you ever skin a man here?"

The dealer commenced to put away his paraphernalia, and the dude said:

"Hold on; don't close!"

"What have you got to say? You got all your money."

"But the lad?"

"He can attend to his own game."

"Not against a skin like you."

"Who are you talking to, sir?"

"You!"

"Go slow."

"I always do. You pay the lad his money."

"Not a dollar. He's got money that don't belong to him."

"Pay him his money."

The dealer drew a cocked pistol, and said:

"You can't bulldoze any one here. You get out of this place!"

"Pay the lad his money."

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"Put up that 'barker'."

The dealer attempted to raise the weapon when two of the

other men who had been playing suddenly whipped out guns, and one of them said:

"Don't pull here!"

"Eh?" cried the dealer; "it's murder? A put-up job, eh?"

The owner of the bank also made a move as though to draw a pistol, and also the man who stood behind the dealer. Madison, meantime, stood a silent witness of the whole scene.

There came an awful pause, and the dealer said:

"This is a put-up murder job. Go, Jimmy, and call the police."

"He need not go for the police," said the dude, and as he spoke he turned over the lapel of his coat under the red rose, and displayed a gold shield.

"We've got all the police here you need," said the dude.

The dealer trembled like an aspen leaf. He looked helplessly toward the other two men, and each of them dropped their lapels and displayed shields. The dealer looked toward the owner of the bank. They held a whispered conversation, and the dealer said:

"I have not the money. I'll pay as far as I've got the money."

"How much have you got?"

The man counted out three thousand dollars.

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"It won't do."

"We can't pay what we haven't got."

"Your pin and watch are worth something."

"They belong to me personally."

"You dealt the cards."

"I'm only an employé"

"That's all right."

"Will you take a fellow's watch and 'sparks'?"

"Sure."

The owner of the bank made a movement to go away, when the dude called:

"Hold on; don't go! We want your contribution!"

"Who are you?" demanded the man.

"Come here and I'll whisper in your ear."

The man did lean down, and the man with the red rose whispered in his ear, and there came a sudden change over the face of the boss gambler.

"Won't you let up?" he said.

"Not for a dime. Go down in your clothes."

The boss gambler removed his watch and chain and his diamonds, and took what money he had in his pocket and laid all on the table.

"Come," said the dude to the dealer, "chip in."

"Never."

"You must!"

"I'm not interested in the bank."

"I want your 'sparks'."

The boss gambler reached over and whispered to the dealer, and the latter commenced to remove his jewelry.

All this time there was a cold, glittering smile on the face of the dude, and when he got all the money and jewelry he said:

"This will do."

CHAPTER III.

THE Monte-Cristo had played a shrewd, deep game. His perambulations around New York had brought him in contact with a detective—a remarkable man, one whose wonderful detective feats had made him famous, and yet few people were acquainted with his personal identity. He was as secret as a star-chamber official, and as deep as the sea itself; but he was an ever-shadowing presence, as far as human skill and cunning permitted a wonderful man to be, and crime was to him as an open book.

He gathered up all the money and the jewelry and passed them over to the young man who had won them, and said:

"Now, my young friend, go; and never again as long as you live be seen in a gambling den!"

Madison Swayne followed the advice of the strange man with the red rose in his button-hole. The youth did not know he was a detective, had no suspicion as to his identity, and only knew that he was a remarkable man and had shown his power to the gamblers.

When down-stairs he met the Monte-Cristo. The latter had waited for him. The youth was excited, and as he walked away beside our hero, he said:

"I can return the bulk of your loan."

"You can, eh?"

"Yes; I was a winner."

"You followed the man with the red rose."

"I did and won."

"Very well, then; bring to me all the winnings to-morrow when I meet you."

"When shall I meet you?"

"Meet me to-morrow night."

"Why not turn over the money now?"

"No; to-morrow will do. Meet me here on this corner to-morrow at nine o'clock in the evening. Be on time. And now good-night."

The Monte-Cristo disappeared without giving the youth a chance to say a word.

Upon the day following the incidents we have described, Madison appeared at his store. He was cordially greeted by his employer, and told that his accounts were all right, and he was congratulated because of the nice accuracy of his books.

Madison was happy, and fully realized how great had been his peril, how wonderful and timely his escape. It was all like a dream to him, and his heart was full of thankfulness, and he really felt that he had learned a lesson that would abide with him all his life long.

The Monte-Cristo had not visited the home where he had taken the rescued Alice Stedman on the day following her rescue. He had left her to the care of Mrs. Morgan, and that lady had utilized the time in preparing the girl for a meeting with her benefactor.

Alice had been properly clothed and every comfort provided for her, and on the evening following her introduction into the home she had asked Mrs. Morgan for a fuller explanation, but that lady had given an evasive answer, and had also avoided asking the girl any questions.

On the day following the scenes described in the faro-room our hero went to the home. He was met in the parlor by Mrs. Morgan, and he asked:

"Well, how is your charge?"

"You would hardly recognize her, sir."

"You have studied her well?"

"I have."

"And what is your conclusion?"

"I believe she is a true and noble girl."

"Have you asked as to her history?"

"I have not."

"Why?"

"I thought it were better told to you."

"Will you notify her that I am here?"

Mrs. Morgan retired from the room, but returned in a few moments leading Alice Stedman into the presence of the Monte-Cristo, and indeed the latter was surprised. The girl was not only beautiful, but possessed of a true and noble face, proving her to be an honorable girl. She was greatly disconcerted when led into the presence of our hero, who was still under a disguise; but she did attempt to express her gratitude.

"Never mind, my dear child; it's all right. You really owe me nothing."

"Ah, sir, you must not say that. I owe all to you."

"Well, let it go so. And now I desire that you will tell me your story."

"About myself?"

"Yes; sit here, and tell me your whole story."

The girl took the seat assigned to her, and in a low, modest tone and manner told the following story:

"My father was the principal of the academy in the city of —. He was a very studious man, and devoted a great deal of time to my education. My mother had died when I was quite a little girl. My father died suddenly about a year ago, and I was placed under the guardianship of a lawyer, a man of wealth, and one in whom my father reposed a great deal of confidence. The lawyer took me to his home. I supposed my father had left sufficient to maintain me, but after I had been a few months in the lawyer's home he informed me that my father had not left me one penny. He said it had taken all that my father did leave to settle his debts up to that time. He had treated me with much kindness, but from that moment I was treated in a cruel manner. Mr. Gazaway I do not think is himself a bad man, but his wife is a very mean and selfish woman. She has two daughters, and they are people who pretend to a great deal of style. I think all would have gone well had it not been that a gentle-

man who had been visiting one of the daughters transferred his more particular attentions to me, and from that moment my persecutions commenced. I was informed that I would be compelled to earn my living. I assented, but I had no idea as to the real humiliations to which I was to be subjected. I was made a menial of at once. I was refused the privilege of the parlor. Indeed I was reduced to the absolute condition of a kitchen girl, and actually summoned to the parlor to serve as a maid in the presence of the man who had dared to address me."

"Did not the man rebel?"

"No, sir, he did not. He appeared to enjoy my humiliation."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, sir."

"Had you ever encouraged him to pay attentions to you?"

"Never; I despised the man from the moment I first laid eyes on him."

"And he showed no indignation at the treatment?"

"Not in the presence of the family, but he sought an opportunity to see me alone, and expressed his disgust and horror; and he followed me up—that is, tried to see me secretly. I sought to avoid him, but he appeared to haunt my steps when I was sent abroad to perform errands."

"Had you no friends to whom you could apply?"

"I was too proud to apply to the mere friends whom I had known when in better circumstances."

"Had you no relatives?"

"None."

"Your treatment was indeed cruel."

"It was; and I determined not to submit. I made up my mind to escape and go into the world and earn my own living; and about this time an incident occurred that caused me to resolve to carry out my purpose. At once the attentions of the man became unbearable. I saw through his purpose. I feared him. I discerned that he was a villain."

"Why did you not appeal to your guardian?"

"I did, when the wretch at length grossly insulted me."

"And what did your guardian say?"

"He said I was the victim of my own self-conceit and egotism. That Mr. Clare was a gentleman."

"He did not even investigate your charges?"

"He did not; and I completed my plans, and one night stole away and came to New York, only to find terrors too terrible to repeat."

CHAPTER IV.

"TELL me just what befell you," said the Monte-Cristo.

"I have said that I received an excellent education, and when I reached New York I sought for a position as governess. I succeeded in securing a position, but within a month I was compelled to give up my position and flee. I secured another position, and was discharged. An enemy had found me out and drove me from my position. I sought to gain a position as teacher in the public schools, but found it impossible, as I had not the right influence to back me, and finally I sought work in a shop. I will not detail further what I was compelled to endure. My face was my misfortune, when my helpless and unprotected position is considered; and, sir, to tell you the truth, I applied for refuge to one of the police justices, and he sent me to a home. I do not believe he really meant to do the cruel act he did. I fear he mistook my position; but, sir, when he sent me to the public asylum I encountered perils greater than any I had yet suffered. I made my escape, but feared to look in the face of man under the light of day. I became, as it were, a tramp, fearing arrest and a return to the place from which I had escaped. And I had been a homeless woman for eleven days when I met the young man to whom I applied for charity. And what followed you know."

We have not attempted to repeat in detail all that Alice Stedman told our hero. We have but outlined her terrible experience, and we doubt if any of our readers can fully realize the perils to which she was subjected, or appreciate that it is possible that such perils can be encountered in the great city of New York to-day. But, alas, little do they know of the undercurrent of metropolitan life!

Our hero listened to the narrative and, when the girl had concluded, he said:

"You are safe now; and I have a tale to tell you."

He proceeded and told the story of the young man whom

he had rescued. Alice was deeply interested, and when our hero concluded his narrative, he said:

"I desire that you should meet my *protégé*, since he was prepared to do you so great a service."

The girl was silent now, and Monte-Cristo, who had weaved a romance of his own, determined to carry out a certain scheme that had entered his mind.

Upon the evening following he met young Swayne, according to agreement, and the young man turned over the money and jewels. The leaving of the same with the youth had been a second test to which our hero had subjected the young man. The two went to supper together and, while they were eating, Madison said:

"This all seems like a dream to me."

"Well, it is a pleasant dream."

"It started in with horror, but it has run into a pleasant dream."

"It is the good angel in the background to whom you owe all."

"Will you tell me about that good angel?"

"You shall see her."

"When?"

"To-morrow night."

"You will take me to her?"

"No, I can not do that; you shall merely have a glimpse of her."

"When and where?"

"I am going to take her to the theater. You shall take a seat so you can command a view of the right-hand proscenium box. You will see me there, and a young lady with me. You can look, but you must be guarded. You must not let her see that you are looking, nor must you recognize me nor give any sign that you are known to me."

"Why all this secrecy?"

"You remember the circumstances under which you met the young lady?"

"I do."

"Then you must recognize why you can not speak to her at present."

Our hero and the young man spent the evening together, and during the time the youth spoke frequently of his mother.

"Let me see," said the Monte-Cristo; "you had eight hundred dollars when you started in on this gambling business?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I will put you in the way to get that money back?"

"I can never visit a gambling saloon again."

"No, you never shall. But we will talk that over at some future time."

When our hero and his young *protégé* separated all was arranged for the visit to the theater on the following evening. The youth would have liked to have asked many questions, but the Monte-Cristo discouraged him and shut him off every time.

Upon the following day our hero visited the Home, and he said to Alice, after the first greetings:

"You have suffered so much I propose that you shall have a little enjoyment."

"I do not need it, sir."

"What do you need?"

"You are really my friend?"

"I am."

"You will always be my friend?"

"I will."

"You believe my story as I told it to you?"

"I do."

"I can not be a dependent. I will so far avail myself of your kindness as to get you to aid me to secure a situation, and I will take care of myself."

"And run again into the same perils from which you have just escaped?"

"No; if you are my friend no one will dare molest me. It is the friendless girl who is assailed."

"That is true. But you must have time to rest and recuperate. In good time you shall become independent."

"I really thank you; and it seems so strange that I should have found so good a friend."

"It's strange in one way, but not in another; but it's all right either way. And now I desire that you will do something to oblige me. Remember, whatever you may get to do, this is your home. Mrs. Morgan will be a mother to you."

"I have learned to love her, sir."

"Yes, she is a lovable woman, and you will find her a fast friend, and a better protector than I. But you must oblige me."

"I will. What can I do?"

"I have a reason why I desire you to go with me to the theater."

There came a frightened look to the girl's face.

"Mrs. Morgan will accompany us, and she fully approves of your going."

"I am in your hands. I will do what you ask," said the girl, in a low tone; but there was a tremor in her voice, as new terror had risen in her heart.

CHAPTER V.

OUR Monte-Cristo read what was on the beautiful girl's mind, but he saw fit to say only, in a kindly voice:

"You need have no fear."

Mrs. Morgan had secured really handsome clothes for Alice, and as the latter prepared to dress for the theater a tremor rose in her heart, and there came a temptation to leave all the finery behind, to resume her old apparel, and rush into the street. She was still standing in a meditative mood when Mrs. Morgan entered the room.

"What, not dressed yet?" exclaimed the lady.

Alice made no answer, but burst into tears.

"Ah; you weep!"

The girl threw herself into the elder lady's arms, and cried.

"Save me!"

"Save you, child?"

"Yes, yes. I am not blind; I see it all. I know what it all means."

"My dear, dear little innocent, you do not know what it all means. You are not blind. No, no; but you are mistaken. I will admit that it does seem strange—it is strange. But you are in no peril; no danger threatens you. Indeed, you are as safe as though you were in your own father's arms and under his care. I swear it. Look in my face. As I am a woman—as I was once a mother—as I am now a believer in our Saviour's mercy, I assure you that you are as safe as though, as I told you, you were in your father's arms."

"Why should all these fine clothes be provided for me—an outcast, a vagrant taken from the streets?"

"Listen, my child: you are well born, you are well educated; why is it you were a homeless wanderer?"

"It was the will of Providence."

"And it is the will of Providence that you should be rescued. It is strange; it is like a fairy story, I know; but it is all simple enough, and some day you will understand it all."

A suspicion flashed through the girl's mind, and she exclaimed:

"Tell me, is that man a relative mine?"

Mrs. Morgan was not a deceiver; but at the moment she felt that a little deceit would do no harm, and she answered, in a significant manner:

"You must not ask me now; but I tell you that you are under the care of one who will watch over you as tenderly and carefully as your own father would have done, if he had been spared to you."

Mrs. Morgan's answer was in an equivocal tone.

"Please tell me truly."

"I can tell you no more at present, child; but you must banish all doubts from your mind. See here!"

Mrs. Morgan exhibited a collection of gems of strange and wondrous brilliancy. The girl gazed in astonishment and admiration, but suddenly she recoiled, and a pallor overspread her face, and she said, in a despairing tone:

"You are deceiving me. Oh! as you are a woman, as you are to die and some day appear before the judgment seat, have mercy upon me! Let me put on my old clothes, those I wore when I came to this house, and let me go forth!"

"To die?"

"Better to die than stay here."

"And you still distrust me, my child?"

"I can not be deceived longer. Why should those gems be brought to dazzle my eyes?"

"Listen: you are a wondrously fortunate girl, that is why they are brought to dazzle your eyes; and I will stand no more of this nonsense. I tell you that you are in the hands of your friends, under the care of those who will cherish and protect you."

"But it all seems so strange!"

"Yes, it is strange; but you must banish all doubts; you

must have more trust. I would yield my heart's blood before any harm should come to you."

"What does it all mean?"

"There is a singular revelation to come to you some day, and then you will learn how fortunate you are. And now listen: it is especially gratifying to your benefactor to have you go to the theater to-night; it is especially his desire that you should wear these gems."

"They are so beautiful!"

"Yes, they are beautiful, but not more pure than the owner of them, nor glitter more harmlessly than his intentions, nor their value greater than his pure friendship for you. I will talk plainly to you just once and once only. If you fear that your benefactor may love you as men love women, let me tell you that he is as cold in that sense as the bronze statue on the parlor mantel down-stairs. So now let me hear no more of your protests."

"But it is so strange!"

"Yes, I have admitted that it is strange, wondrously strange; but it is true, and you are a fortunate girl. Your very misfortunes have been transmuted into your good fortune. So finish your dressing, and then you shall put on these gems."

The robing of Alice was completed, and then she put on the gems, and indeed they were rare and beautiful. And when she was fully attired Mrs. Morgan said:

"You are a beautiful girl, Alice."

The girl turned pale and trembled.

"You need not turn pale and tremble, child. It is a good thing to be beautiful. Come, we will go to the parlor. Your benefactor awaits you."

Our Monte-Cristo had instructed the girl to address him as Mr. Brown. When she entered the room, he appeared deeply absorbed, and hardly noticed how beautiful she looked. He merely remarked:

"Ah, you are ready?"

In a trembling voice the girl answered:

"Yes, I am ready."

"We will go."

A carriage was at the door. They entered it, and were driven rapidly away, and soon stopped in front of the theater. Gay and laughing throngs were entering. Alice had never been in a metropolitan theater before during her life, but she wore her elegant robes like a queen, and was at home in the rôle of a lady. She was led to a private box, and soon took her seat, and her attention was absorbed in looking about the house. To her it was a dazzling scene.

Our Monte-Cristo said but little to her. He handed her a jeweled opera-glass, and sat and enjoyed her childish enjoyment of the splendid scene. He was thus watching her when suddenly he saw a pallor overspread her face, her hand trembled, indeed the glasses fell into her lap, and she looked as though she were about to faint.

"What is the matter?" demanded our hero, in a whisper.

For a moment she did not speak. Her emotion overcame her; and our hero was compelled to repeat his question, and then, in a forced tone, she said:

"They are here."

"Who?"

"The Gazaway family."

"Indeed! So much the better."

"Mr. Chase is with them."

A shadow fell over the face of our Monte-Cristo as a suspicion flashed through his mind. He looked at the girl intently, and asked:

"Did you say Mr. Chase was with them?"

"Yes."

"Do you fear him?"

"I do."

"Is that the cause of your trepidation?"

"Yes."

"Why do you fear him?" came the question.

CHAPTER VI.

THE Monte-Cristo's tones were tremulous as he put the question, and a dire suspicion flashed through his mind.

"I fear him," came the answer.

Our hero reached over and whispered in her ear:

"Do you love him?"

"I hate him!" came the answer; "but I fear him. See--see! his evil eye is upon me now! They have just recognized me!"

A moment the Monte-Cristo's mind was busy, and then he said:

"Alice, I have a startling proposition to make."

The girl opened her eyes wide, but did not answer.

"You know we sometimes adopt children, and they call us father. I can not adopt you as my child, to serve the purpose I have in view, but I can adopt you as my niece. I can pretend to be your uncle. We need tell no lie about it. I shall merely claim you as my niece, and you shall call me uncle, and we will leave it to their imaginations to determine how it is I am your uncle."

"Why should we do this?"

The girl spoke in a low tone.

"For your better protection and for my special gratification I will tell you, otherwise those people may start a tale that may follow you all your life. And, again, I am a singular fellow. I like to work certain kinds of revenges—little, harmless ones, but just complete in their way. I do not like the looks of that man Chase. He is a sneak from away back. We can have some fun if you are sure you hate him."

"I do."

"The Gazaways are not relatives of yours?"

"No, they are not."

"And do you consent to my plan?"

"I do."

Alice was very quick and a good reasoner. She did not exactly discern the purpose of the Monte-Cristo, but she had a faint idea as suggested by his plan.

"All right," said our hero. "Now remain at your perfect ease, discover no more annoyance or surprise, and let me tell the marvelous tale to these people when they seek us. You just look them over in a supercilious manner. See—see! they have started in already! Can you read the looks of assumed holy horror on their faces? We will have lots of fun, child; for, as you see, Chase's countenance wears a thoughtful look. They are mean people—I can see it at a glance—and it appears to be a sort of mission of mine, Alice, to circumvent mean people. Now, just prepare to enjoy the play."

At this moment the curtain rose and Alice was all attention. She was charmed and carried away. The whole experience was new to her, and for the moment she forgot her surroundings and her too recent experience, and her attention, as stated, was fixed.

The first act ended in due time, and the curtain went down, and the Monte-Cristo told Alice to look over the house.

"It is a pleasant experience," he said. "I always enjoy it: You see so many different phases of character."

Our hero had discovered that Alice was a girl possessed of fine mental gifts, one who could appreciate the suggestions he occasionally made to her. She was far above the average girl as concerned intelligence.

The lovely girl did let her glance roam about the auditorium, and soon there came again a pallor to her face, and her opera glass was fixed upon one individual.

"What now?" demanded the Monte-Cristo.

The girl did not answer.

"I see you have made another discovery."

"Yes, sir; I recognize a face, and I do hope and pray he will not recognize me."

"You recognize another face?"

"I do."

"The face of whom?"

"Ah, sir!" ejaculated the girl, as she drew back.

"Call me uncle, Alice. You must accustom yourself to the title, or there will come an awkward betrayal some time."

"Shall I call you uncle?"

"Yes. It is a sacred title, second only to mother and father, or husband and son. Whom do you see?"

"Do you not recognize a face, uncle?"

"Yes, I recognize several. I have many friends in the house."

"But one face?"

"Where is it?"

"There, uncle."

"That is good—you say it nicely. And now, my dear niece, where is the face you recognize?"

"There, sir."

"I do not get the direction. Tell me whose face it is, then I can find it."

Alice lowered her voice, as she said:

"It is the face of the young man who offered me help."

"Ah, is he here?"

"Yes."

"Let me see," said the Monte-Cristo, as he ran his eye over the audience, and at length said:

"Yes, that is so. There he is. Well, well, what a fine face he has! It is really easily remembered. Compare his face to that of the rascal Chase. But be careful; the young man is looking up here. He evidently recognizes me; but does he know who you are?"

"It can not be possible."

"Why not?"

"I hardly know myself, uncle, your kindness has wrought such a wondrous change."

"The young man suspects who you are."

"He does?"

"Yes."

"How can he?"

"Have you not discovered that I delight in surprises and in mysteries, and in all sorts of wonderful performances? I'll tell you. I've led the young man to believe that there is something mysterious about you, and, to tell the truth, he looks upon your demand for charity as some weird test."

"How can it be?"

"Well, I threw a halo of romance around the whole incident. I delight in such little amazements; they are a compensation to me for the time I spend in seeking out objects worthy my care and attention."

The girl blushed.

"There, you must not blush nor ever feel ashamed. There is no humiliation to you in what has occurred during our intercourse. You are entitled to my care. There must be absolute frankness between us. But do see that Chase stare! Well, I've a rod in pickle for him and for the Gazaways. When the curtain falls again, Alice, I shall leave you for a few moments, and, with your permission, I will bring that young man, Swayne, here."

"Oh, sir!" pleaded the girl.

"Now, now! you are my niece. Will you have Swayne or Chase?"

"Neither."

"Yes, yes; you must enter the spirit of the joke with me; we will have some amusement."

"Do not bring the young gentleman, Swayne, here."

"Why not?"

"I can not bear it."

"Bear what?"

"The mortification."

"My child, there is to be no mortification. He knows nothing of your antecedents. He shall know nothing about you until you choose to tell him yourself. Your meeting with him, if he recognizes you, shall be a little mystery that shall bother him, and we will enjoy his grimaces as he seeks to solve it. As I said, you shall yourself, in good time, tell him just what you choose."

"Are you determined to bring him here?"

"No, I am not determined; I shall not force any one's company upon you. But suppose I should bring Chase?"

"As you please."

"Remember, there are to be no explanations until I give the word. We must have our fun."

CHAPTER VII.

WHEN the curtain dropped the Monte-Cristo left the box. He walked around to the corridor and looked inside the auditorium. He saw Alice; she did indeed look beautiful as she sat there.

He left the corridor and passed a moment later to the street, and was just lighting a cigarette when a hand was laid lightly on his shoulder.

He turned and confronted Madison Swayne. The youth was greatly excited.

"Halloo! what is up now?" demanded the Monte-Cristo.

"That lady with you!"

"Well?"

"She is the angel to whom I owe my rescue!"

"You owe her nothing."

"Ah, yes; I see it all! She was carrying out some wild freak, and, fortunately, I became an object of pity to her."

"You are mistaken."

"Is she not the lady I met?"

"Does she look like the poor, miserable girl you met a few nights ago?"

"She does not, I admit."

"Do you see any resemblance?"

"I admit I do not."

"Then how dare you assume that the elegant young lady in my company is the same person whom you met that eventful night?"

"You will excuse me: it was only a strange suspicion that I indulged."

"You must not indulge any such suspicions, or you may get yourself into an awkward scrape; for I intend to introduce you to that lovely lady."

"No; I am much obliged."

"You do not desire an introduction?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

The young man colored, but did not answer.

"Come, tell me why not."

"You may have told her my history. She may know of my disgrace."

"Nonsense! Do you suppose I go about telling such things as that?"

"And is she really ignorant?"

"You have not told it to any one?"

"No, sir."

"Then you must believe that I have not."

The Monte-Cristo, as our readers will observe, spoke in a guarded manner—by implication only. He did not assert or deny anything. The fact is he had only partially related the young man's history to Alice.

"Will you hold my unfortunate secret?"

"I will."

"Thanks. And if you will permit, I should really like an introduction to the lovely girl."

"Very well; come with me; you shall be introduced."

Our hero had left the box but a moment when Alice was surprised to see the man, Chase, enter. He stepped into the apartment boldly and exclaimed, in a familiar tone:

"Halloo, Alice! I am glad to see you. I recognized you at a glance."

"Sir, who gave you permission to enter this box?"

"I took counsel with myself, and decided that you would be glad to see me. But you need not be afraid; I will not give you away."

"Will you promise not to give me away?"

"Certainly I will. Why, Alice, I have mourned you as one dead! I am more than happy to see you again, and you have a friend in me. Yes, you need not fear; I will keep your secret."

"Ah! you are so kind!"

Alice was disgusted, but she was really a smart, bright girl, and she managed to conceal her disgust in order to give the rascal a big fall when the time arrived.

"How have you been, Alice?"

"I am well now."

"Who is the old fellow you are with?"

"He will return in a moment, and I will introduce you."

"I am with the Gazaways. They are awful mad because I came here."

"Are they?"

"Yes; but I do not care for them."

The man remained and talked in the same strain until our Monte-Cristo re-entered the box, and Alice, immediately after an introduction to young Swayne, said:

"Uncle, this is Mr. Chase."

The Monte-Cristo looked the man over.

"He has kindly promised not to give me away, uncle; isn't he good?"

The man stared. He colored and blushed.

"Yes," continued Alice, "he has promised not to tell you that I was once a maid in the Gazaways' kitchen; isn't he good?"

Alice was excited, and had evidently forgotten the presence of Madison Swayne. But that youth had stepped from the box immediately after the first introduction, and really did not hear what Alice said.

"So this is Mr. Chase?"

"Yes, uncle."

"The fellow you were telling me about?"

"Yes, uncle."

Alice laid particular stress upon the endearing title "uncle."

"Did you invite Mr. Chase here?"

"No; he came here to kindly tell me that he would not give me away. He is the wretch who insulted me and drove

me from the miserable home where I was stopping. But he has kindly promised not to give me away!"

The Monte-Cristo enjoyed the spicy interview. He saw that there was more in the beautiful Alice as far as wit was concerned than he had dreamed. The fellow, Chase, was completely disconcerted. He turned all colors, and Alice enjoyed his confusion and so did our hero. The latter turned to the man and said:

"I hope, sir, you will reconsider your determination, and give this young lady away. You look like a fellow fully capable of performing the job."

The man edged toward the door of the box.

"Are you going?" asked Alice.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Oh, do not go! But after all I can not keep you away from the delightful Gazaways. Please ask them not to give me away; it might reflect back so sadly upon themselves."

The man passed from the box, and Alice laughed outright. She was hysterically excited, and said:

"You must really excuse me, uncle. I do not know what has come over me, but I could not help it."

"Why, my dear child, I am delighted! But now mark me: do not give yourself away. Young Swayne is to return when the curtain goes down."

"I was so excited I was hardly aware of his presence."

"Yes, and fortunately he left the box, and did not hear what you said. And I did not want him to hear it; but I am glad you said it all the same."

The play proceeded, and occasionally Alice glanced over to where the Gazaways were sitting. There was great excitement in their midst, and as our hero glanced over at the lawyer, Gazaway, there came a suspicion to his mind.

"By George!" he muttered, in an under-tone, "I reckon I'll investigate that matter. There may be something in it, after all!"

For the third time the curtain descended, and the Monte-Cristo a moment later led young Swayne back to the box. The young gentleman was greatly embarrassed, and there was a strange light in his eyes. In due season he rose to go. The Monte-Cristo followed him from the box.

"What mystery is this?" asked the youth, when once outside.

"Mystery?" ejaculated our hero.

"Yes, mystery."

"To what mystery do you allude?"

"Sir, I can not explain how it is, but it seems to me as though I had seen that lovely girl once before."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE Monte-Cristo turned the subject for the time being, and shortly after the play came to an end.

We will now anticipate our narrative and pass from the strict record of incidents in their order to acquaint our readers with the final outcome of the little romance we have detailed.

The Monte-Cristo took Madison Swayne under his care, and advanced the young man in business, finally making him a junior partner in a prosperous firm. Meantime he had carried on the mystery as concerned the fair girl, Alice Stedman, but so managed that the young people became acquainted, and the usual result followed—they fell in love. We will also state that our hero interviewed Mr. Gazaway, and that gentleman was frightened into a confession that he held about twenty thousand dollars in trust for his ward. He excused his conduct, and asserted that he had made every endeavor to find Alice after her escape from his house, and he said he had concealed the knowledge of her fortune in obedience to a request from her father. Our hero did not think it worth the trouble to argue the matter. He saw the will and there learned the real incentive for the guardian's action. His own daughters were residuary legatees under the will, as Mr. Stedman had no known relatives.

A year had passed since the occurrence of the incidents we have related, and one night Madison Swayne called upon Alice. Although the young people had met frequently, their intercourse had been rather restrained. Both appeared to feel a consciousness that there was a mystery attending their first meeting and later acquaintance; but the young man became madly in love all the same, and upon the night in question, after a few ordinary remarks, the youth drew Alice to a seat beside him on the sofa and said:

"Alice, I have something very important to say to you."

The fair girl blushed and trembled, and trepidation shone in her eyes. She appeared terribly frightened and disconcerted.

"I will be frank, Alice, and come right to the point. I love you, and I wish you to become my wife," said Madison.

Alice became greatly agitated, and said, in a low, trembling voice:

"I feared this."

"Feared it?" repeated Madison.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Let me ask you one question. Has our good benefactor ever told you my real history?"

"No."

"Have you never suspected?"

Madison did not answer, but he turned pale.

"Tell me: have you not suspected?"

The youth became greatly agitated.

"Can it be?" he murmured.

"Yes; all that you may suspect is true."

The youth became as cold as ice. His anguish was terrible to behold. It would be impossible for a human face to more singularly pass from an expression of hope to one of despair.

"Oh, Alice!" he murmured, "why had I not died ere I saw you? I love you—yes, and I can never love another! My life's hope is blasted! Let us forget that we ever met. I will pray for you all my life long, but we will never meet again."

There was a strange, wild look in the eyes of Alice as she said:

"It is better so."

"Oh, that I were dead!" ejaculated the youth.

He was a manly fellow, but, as *he saw it*, he was confronted by one of the most terrible contingencies that can possibly rise to confront a sincere and honest lover and an honorable man. He was of the heroic make, but, as *he saw it*, the barrier between him and his love was insurmountable, the dividing chasm impassable. His heart was turned to stone, his blood to the chill of ice.

There was a coldness in the tone of Alice as she said:

"I am sorry for you, but I can not conceal the truth from you."

"You have done nobly to tell me the truth, Alice. I thank you for not deceiving me. I could have been easily deceived. I did not dream this was true, poor girl! Dear Alice, I love, I shall always love you—but, no, no; it can not be!"

The youth shuddered as he spoke, and his tones were a wail of despair.

"I will go," he said. "We will never meet again. But I pray you from this hour be true to yourself. You are a noble girl. I know your misfortune is not your fault. Heaven bless you!"

Madison left the house, and when beyond the door tears welled in his eyes. A more miserable man never rushed madly through the streets; indeed, as he ran, for he was too excited to walk, groans of agony fell from his lips. He was fairly beside himself.

A few moments after Madison's departure the Monte-Cristo entered the room where Alice sat. She was lost in deep thought. She looked like a beautiful piece of draped statuary. Her eyes were set, and her face was pale, and her features had lost their mobility; all muscular action appeared to have vanished. So engrossed was she in her thoughts she did not notice the entrance of her kind benefactor, and the latter stood with his kindly eyes fixed upon her for a moment; then he crossed the room, stood before her, and said:

"Alice, what is the matter?"

"Nothing," came the answer; but it was borne on a sigh, and a sigh followed its passage from between her lips.

"Something is the matter, my child."

"No; nothing."

"Yes, yes; and now come, you must tell me all."

The Monte-Cristo took a seat beside the beautiful girl and clasped her hand. It was as cold as ice—indeed, its coldness sent a chill trembling over the warm frame of her friend.

Our Monte-Cristo had maintained his disguise. His cover was perfect, and it would have taken an experienced expert to have discovered the fact that he was carrying on his little game under a "transform."

"I have nothing to tell," murmured the girl.

"Oh, yes, you have!"

"No, no!"

"Would you deceive me?"

"No, no!"

"But you are not trusting me."

A moment the girl appeared to recall her full faculties, and she said, in her old-time tones of earnestness:

"I would ask a favor."

"Yes, and it is granted."

"You are so kind, my dear uncle!"

"I can not help being kind to you."

"It is hardly fair to accept your promises, so I will not. You shall not grant the favor until I make the request."

"Proceed."

"Please do not ask me why I am suffering. Let me have one secret from you."

"One secret?"

"Yes."

"My dear child, let me tell you something. I fear that if I were to grant your request I should merely indorse a resolution you have taken to remain miserable all your life."

"No, no!"

"Come; let me tell you that even had I promised I should have insisted upon your making a confidant of me."

"I can not—no, I can not! I never will!"

"Oh, yes, you shall! Come now, tell me all."

"Do not press me. I must—I will refuse to speak; but it is to spare another that I am silent."

CHAPTER IX.

THERE was an amused expression upon the Monte-Cristo's face as he said:

"And it is to spare another that you are silent?"

"Yes."

"Madison has been here?"

"He has."

"I thought so."

There followed a moment's silence, broken at length by Alice, who said:

"Why did you not tell him the truth as concerned me? Why did you forbid me to speak? Why did you remain silent?"

"I had a purpose."

"Oh, sir, you are always so wise and discreet! But I fear, in this matter, you have done a grievous wrong."

"To whom?"

"To Madison."

"I guess not."

"You should have let me speak."

"I guess not. And now tell me all."

"No, no; do not ask me to speak."

"Am I not your best friend?"

"Yes, yes; you are my dear, dear uncle."

"And you can trust me?"

"I can."

"Alice, I will reveal to you a secret. You thought you were the recipient of my bounty?"

"And I am."

"I did not tell you a fact before for reasons. I will tell it now. A greater wrong was done to you than you dreamed by your guardian."

The girl's eyes opened wide.

"Your father did not leave you penniless; you are possessed of quite a snug sum of money in your own right. I have compelled Gazaway to tell the truth."

The girl did not appear to feel any gladness upon hearing the revelation; she merely muttered, involuntarily:

"My heart is broken!"

"Your heart is broken?"

"Oh, forgive me! I did not mean to betray myself."

"You must betray all to me. I suspect much. I must know all."

"I can say no more."

"Oh, yes, you will tell me all! Madison was here and declared his love for you."

The girl colored, and then again her face became deathly pale.

"Ah, it is as I suspect! Now, my dear child, for the moment put all your sensitiveness in your pocket and tell me the truth. Tell me all. Tell me that because of the conditions under which I became your friend, you turned a deaf ear to my young friend's suit, you broke his heart and your own,

and that at this moment you are both the suffering victims of a false pride."

"It is not so."

The Monte-Cristo gave a start, and there came a grave and anxious look to his face.

"Tell me truly, Alice," he said. "You can trust me. It is possible I have been deceived; but you can trust me. You are not to blame. Do you not love him?"

The girl was silent.

"Come, answer me!"

"I can not."

"Why not?"

"Oh, he will tell you if you are to know the facts!"

"No, you must tell me, my dear child."

"I can not—no, I can not!"

"But you must! Do not fear. Tell me openly. You do not love him."

"You will never betray me, uncle?"

"Never!"

"I do love him."

"And he certainly loves you."

"Oh, yes!"

"And yet you are unhappy?"

"I am. My heart is broken."

"You must tell me all."

"Let him tell you."

"No, no. You must tell me."

"Madison did ask me to be his wife."

"He is a noble fellow, Alice. I have tried him through and through, and I have not found him wanting. He is a worthy young man. Why did you refuse him?"

"I did not."

"You did not?"

"No."

"Then what is the matter, and why do you tell me your heart is broken?"

"It came about as I feared."

"What did you fear?"

"The revelation."

"Of what?"

"The truth."

"What truth?"

"The facts of my first acquaintance with you, and the circumstances under which I first met him."

"Well, he suspected all you told him?"

"No, no."

"Yes, he did, the sly dog! I knew all the time he suspected who you really were."

"I told him."

"Well?"

"He thanked me, and withdrew his offer to make me his wife."

There came a strange look to the Monte-Cristo's face, a fierce look, an expression seldom seen in his kindly eyes.

"Can it be possible?" he muttered.

"You must not blame him. He is right."

"Right! No, no; listen, Alice, there is no excuse for his pride—if it was pride—that has governed him. You are more worthy than he. You were unfortunate, but you would have died before you would have yielded to temptation; and he well knew it is not for him to show loftiness of spirit; but tell me, word for word, all that passed between you."

"Do not ask me."

"Can you remember all that passed?"

"I can."

"So as to repeat it, word for word?"

"Yes; every word was burned into my memory as though by fire."

"Then tell me all."

Alice did repeat, word for word, all that had passed; and when she had concluded there came a smile to his face, and he said, in a low tone:

"He is a better fellow than I dared hope to find him."

The girl gazed in amazement on the Monte-Cristo, who said:

"It's all right, Alice. You shall be happy yet, and he is worthy of your love. He is a greater hero than I thought him."

The girl still permitted the amazed look to irradiate her face.

"My child, let the smiles come back."

"No, no, I can not become his wife."

"Say nothing rash."

"I can never become his wife."

"And yet you love him?"

The girl did not answer.

"You think there is a dividing chasm?"

"There is."

"My child, there is not a thread between you; no, not a thread."

"Ah! you do not fully understand."

"Understand what?"

"He may overcome his pride—yes, his love may conquer his reluctance, but I should ever be haunted with the fatal truth."

"What fatal truth?"

"That my once lowly condition had appeared as a barrier between his love and pride."

"This is all nonsense."

"You do not know me."

"Ah, yes, I do! But, my dear child, you are both laboring under a mistake. It is only a shadow that divides. One flash of the truth will dispel the mist."

"You do not understand, dear uncle."

"Oh, yes, I understand all! And in the end you will witness a funny *denouement*."

CHAPTER X.

THE look of amazement was succeeded by an expression of perplexity on the lovely face of Alice.

"Yes, yes," repeated our hero, "quite an amusing *denouement* awaits you; and now you can just dismiss all fears, all shadows, and indulge to the full all the rosy dreams attending the knowledge that you love and are loved."

The Monte-Cristo left the room, leaving Alice the victim of changing emotions. Ray Phillips was a quick-witted man, and saw the misapprehension under which Madison Swayne was laboring.

We will here state that the youth had brought his mother to New York, and they were living comfortably and happily in a flat. Our hero had met his *protégé*'s mother, and had found her a worthy parent of so good a son. He proceeded direct to the home of his young friend. He took the elevator and ascended to his apartment, and a few minutes later the two were alone and face to face.

"Well, sir," said the Monte-Cristo, "I have just come from the presence of Alice."

Our hero had found the young man as sad a picture of anguish and distress as he had Alice when he surprised her sitting statue-like in the parlor.

"Yes," repeated Ray, "I have just come from Alice; and you are a nice fellow!"

Madison did not speak.

"I am surprised," said the Monte-Cristo.

"You know all?" demanded Madison.

"Well, I know a little. I know that you asked Alice to become your wife, and in the same breath told her you would not marry her."

"But do you know all?"

"I know that much."

"But do you know why I professed to love her, asked her to become my wife, and then declined to press my suit?"

"I can't say that I do know just exactly why you acted in such an erratic manner."

"Did she not tell you?"

"She reluctantly, upon my persistent command, told me all you said."

"She told you all?"

"All you said, and how you acted. Hang it, you did not intend to marry the girl! Why did you go and propose and back down, all in the same minute?"

"She made to me a revelation."

"She did, eh?"

"Yes."

"And do you mean to tell me it was a revelation?"

The youth looked up in surprise, and the Monte-Cristo repeated the question:

"Do you mean to tell me it was a revelation?"

"Certainly it was a revelation."

"And do you mean to make me think that I deceived you?"

"No, you did not deceive me; you did not know."

"Know what?"

"What I know now—what she confessed to me."

"She confessed that she was the poor, homeless girl who asked charity from you one cold winter's night?"

"She did."

"And do you mean to tell me that you did not know all the time that she was the same person?"

"I did know it, but I did not suspect what she revealed."

"Oh, you did not?"

"No, sir."

"You're a flat, Maddy, a regular flat!"

"Sir, I am under great obligations to you. I owe all to you, but I can not think you would ask of me this sacrifice."

"What sacrifice?"

"That I should marry Alice."

"Ah, you consider it a sacrifice to marry a beautiful girl! If you thought it a sacrifice why did you go so far as to confess your love?"

"I never suspected the real truth."

"You thought she was an heiress in disguise?"

"You wrong me."

"Do I?"

"You certainly do."

"I do not think there is half as much wrong in what I say, when you seek a girl's love, win, propose to marry her, and then back down simply because you discover that she is not an heiress."

"I did not suspect that she was an heiress."

"And you knew that she was once a beggar?"

"I did."

"Then how in thunder can you explain your conduct?"

"Do not misunderstand. I did not withdraw my request for her to become my wife because I heard that she was poor and once a beggar upon the streets. I would marry her if she were still a beggar clothed in rags."

"Then what in thunder is the matter with you?"

"Can it be possible, my kind benefactor, that you do not know the truth?"

"What truth?"

"You must know it."

"What are you getting at, young man?"

"Answer me truly. Do you not suspect the truth?"

"I do suspect something, I will admit."

"Will you tell me what you suspect?"

"I suspect you are an ass!" came the prompt reply.

The young man recoiled.

"We may differ," he said.

"How?"

"You may not have the same ideas that I have."

"You may have more ideas than sense, young man."

"I must consider my mother."

"Oh, it's your mother's pride you are considering! She would not let you marry a portionless girl who was once a beggar!"

"I will speak plainly."

"Do so."

"I would not marry Alice if she were endowed with millions, and yet I love her as truly as man ever loved woman, and I shall always love her. I wish I were dead!"

"Well, honestly speaking, my boy, I think that you have better reason to shoot yourself than you had the night I snatched the pistol from your grasp. Now let us come down to plain facts. Why is it you will not marry Alice?"

"Will you answer me truly, sir?"

"I will."

"Do you not know the truth?"

"Yes, I do know the truth."

"All the truth as concerns that dear girl?"

"Yes, I know all the truth as concerns that dear girl."

"Speak plainly; it is a serious moment. What do you know?"

"I know that she is the truest and noblest girl you ever met. She is all truth, all honor, all love, and beautiful, and you are a lucky man to have been her lover—a fool to act as you have!"

The young man gazed aghast, and after a moment said:

"She is beautiful, she is noble, she is loving—but did you say she was pure?"

"Yes; as pure and spotless as an angel from heaven!"

"Do you mean in earnest all that your words imply?"

"I do."

"Then you do not know all."

"Yes; I know all."

"You can not know all."

"I do know all."

"She has not told you what she told me."

"She has told me all that she told you."

"Impossible; or you would not speak as you do. *She told me she was a Magdalen,*" came the startling declaration.

"You lie!" was the response.

CHAPTER XI.

THERE followed a moment's silence, and the benefactor and his *protégé* gazed into each other's eyes. It was the latter who first spoke. He said:

"Do you believe I would tell a deliberate untruth?"

"No."

"And yet you say I lie."

"Yes, you certainly do lie, under a mistake. Alice made no such admission to you."

Madison appeared dazed, and yet there came a bright, glad look to his face, and in low tones he murmured:

"Can it be possible I was mistaken?"

"If you believe she made any such admission you are mistaken."

"If I am, hope rises in my heart. It is the happiest moment of my life to learn that I made a mistake."

"You might almost say it was the happiest mistake of your life, if it was not such a pig-headed one. Can you repeat your own and her words?"

"I can."

"Exactly?"

"Yes."

"Do so."

The youth repeated the conversation just as it occurred, and when he had concluded, the Monte-Cristo said, in an interrogatory tone:

"Well?"

"She said all that I suspected was true."

"Let me explain: she indulged all along a suspicion that you identified her, and she also believed that you did not know that at the time she solicited alms that she was really a penniless beggar. She thought you might suspect as much, and she told you frankly that all you suspected was true, and had you not shot off on a false suspicion, she would have fully explained to you, but you cut off all explanations."

"I am a fool!" said Madison, in his usual impetuous manner.

"No, my lad, you are not as much a fool as you think yourself. I will admit that the circumstances under which you met Alice would naturally suggest a certain possibility; but let me tell you the truth—no purer girl ever lived. And, unknown to herself, all the time she has been an heiress, and she is well born, well bred, and well educated; she is noble, pure, and truly beautiful; and if she forgives you and becomes your wife, you will be one of the luckiest men in the world, and marry a girl worthy of the highest destiny that can come to a lovely woman."

"I will go to her at once and atone."

"No, you will not."

"And do you mean to punish me?"

"No. Let me tell you, Alice does not know what your real suspicion was. She despises you now. She thinks you withdrew your declaration simply because of her poverty. Her pride is hurt, and if you go to her there may be made a chasm that can not be crossed."

"What am I to do?"

"I will bridge the seeming chasm for you, and to-morrow you shall see her."

The Monte-Cristo did in the most delicate manner explain the mistake the youth had made, and also explained how his suspicions under all the circumstances might be a ready conclusion, and when he had finished, Alice really had a higher respect for her lover than she had indulged previously.

The two met again. No allusion was made to the former interview, and within a week Alice, the whilom beggar for alms, married the young man to whom she had appealed.

As stated, we have anticipated the *denouement*, and during the time intervening our Monte-Cristo had many strange and wonderful adventures.

It is an historic fact that the race of which the Indian, Alka, was a descendant possessed the secret of dyeing. The writer, and possibly many of our readers, have seen some of the beautiful clothes still in existence made by them and their so-called descendants, and from his Indian friend the Monte-Cristo had learned many secrets, and among others a wonderful face dye. The latter was made from the juice of a certain nut-shell, and with its use one could change himself from a blonde to a dark brunette, and to as graduated a shade as desired.

The Monte-Cristo determined to go under a positive cover.

He resolved to change his appearance so radically that identification would be impossible, and he succeeded. He caused the rumor to go abroad that R. P. Myers was going West, and in due time the mysterious millionaire disappeared, and Ella Dickerson was disconsolate, as he had gone carrying his millions with him, and had not spoken to her the magic words.

Ella had been very much troubled in spirit ever since the time her father received through her the aid that saved him from bankruptcy and exposure; and despite all other indices she secretly indulged the suspicion that her father's friend was the young millionaire, and she schooled herself to believe that it was a secret passion for her that had led to his munificence. There was another mystery that troubled her, and that was the identity of the mysterious Black Knight. She had never been able to explain, even to herself, the strange adventure. She indulged several suspicions, and constructed many theories, but not once did she succeed in catching upon a confirming incident.

As stated, it became rumored that the young millionaire had gone West. He certainly disappeared, and the places that had known him knew him no more for the time being; and he had gone without bidding Alice adieu, and without even directly giving her the least intimation of his intended departure.

The summer came on again, and the season when the rich and gay fled from the stifling heat of the city for the breezy mountains and sea-side, and Ella in due time proceeded to a summer resort. The grand hotel where she abided was the resort of all the great families of New York during a certain season. These great people were "flitters." They anticipated the arrival of the "madding crowd," and for a time had indulged the sweet society of themselves. And one bright afternoon the gay guests were gathered on the great balconies, when a solitary guest arrived at the hotel. The new-comer was a curious-looking fellow, possessed of a tawny skin almost as dark as that of an Indian. He was rather shabbily dressed, but had withal the appearance of a gentleman—a seedy and needy one, of course. He came up from the depot afoot, and carried his baggage in his dark fist. He registered under the peculiar name of Henry Alka, and was content to be shoved in a little room on top of the house. His arrival caused but little attention, nor was he by any means the observed of all observers after his arrival. He had come quietly, and quietly he remained. No one sought him, and he sought no one, and yet he was to create an excitement ere he left that great summer abode.

Our Monte-Cristo was a peculiar man. He did enjoy surprises and sudden transformations. He did enjoy "taking people down," as the term goes. He did enjoy rewarding the virtuous and humble; and he did also enjoy hugely the confusion of the arrogant and overproud and insincere pretenders to be met with the world over; and, as stated, ere he left that hotel he had lots of fun.

CHAPTER XII.

UPON the morning following his arrival, the Monte-Cristo seated himself at the far end of the balcony, and took an occasional peep at the company, and strange and funny thoughts ran through his mind. He was a keen observer, a close student of human nature, and an excellent reader of character; and as he studied that company of self-styled aristocrats, he made many amusing comments, and his observations resulted in an abundance of cynical conclusions. He overheard conversations on every side of him, as it is the weakness of people at public resorts to talk loud and talk about themselves, or, rather, talk for the benefit of others, and this silly trait prevails to a certain extent among the classes who call themselves the highest, and it is not peculiar to American society, but prevails the world over.

As the Monte-Cristo sat and studied, he located each particular person as concerned their peculiar characteristics, and he soon heard so much bosh about old families that his mental stomach turned in disgust, and the idea came to him what a singular result would follow a sudden resurrection if these ancestors of whom their descendants boasted should suddenly appear in the flesh. What averseness to recognition when old-time Knickerbocker shoe-makers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, barbers, and peddlers—founders of some of our great families—came along, a great procession attired in the uniform that pertained to their several callings.

The Monte-Cristo was a thorough democrat. He believed properly in personal worth and merit, and had no respect for

a fashionable noodle and vagabond because his father emigrated to New York somewhere about the beginning of the seventeenth century. He cared nothing for big names; what commanded his respect and admiration was big hearts. He cared not for fashionable names and outward pretense of refinement, which was merely superficial and worked to cover up the vulgarity of a naturally corrupt nature. To him the best families were those who conducted themselves as good Christian people. In fact he hated shams, and respected all that was good and true.

As he moved along the balcony some of these self-styled great people would recoil from a nearness to him, as royalty would recoil from the common rabble, and they would have so recoiled had they known he was all that was honorable and good. But they would have clung closely to the millionaire Myers had they known he was morally a wretch.

The Monte-Cristo had been several days at the hotel, and he had selected his particular subjects, those for whom he meant "to go" and cover with confusion.

There was one person present—a widow, a woman possessed of a coarse sort of beauty, and who pretended more than any other resident in the house.

She was a dangerous woman—a spiteful, bitter, back-biting cat. She was set to do a great deal of mischief, and yet she received an unusual amount of recognition because she had caused it to be believed that she was wealthy. It was known that when young she had married a decrepit old man, and it was concluded as a matter of course that she had married him for his money, and at his death had got it. One thing is true: the most gullible of people are these pretenders and the so-called fashionable and society people. Some one has but to whisper that so-and-so is rich, and they all believe it at once, and the flattery and attentions commence at once.

The Monte-Cristo conceived a particular aversion to the widow, whose name was Braisted. He chanced to be seated at her table in the dining-room, and from meal to meal listened to more arrant nonsense than would fill a book of scandal.

Ella Dickerson was there in all her glory, and as the Monte-Cristo had an opportunity to watch her unobserved, and behold her true character as it developed amid her congenial surroundings, he was compelled to feel fate was kind and on his side when it forced upon him the humiliation of a rejection when he sought to make the creature his wife.

Our hero also fell to another romance, and he determined to follow the thing up. He was particularly interested, because in many respects the incidents were parallel to his own exciting experience.

Among the guests at the hotel was a family composed of father, mother, and two daughters. The father and mother were very pretentious people, and, as frequently happens, one of the daughters was truly a sweet and lovely girl, while her sister was quite commonplace: a good enough young miss, but not particularly strong in any one characteristic.

There was at the hotel also a young fellow just graduated from college. He was a handsome, free-hearted, and particularly modest youth, highly accomplished, and just the fellow to shine in such society, provided there was a big bank account behind his other fascinations.

Our hero had not been long at the hotel when he learned that it was generally understood that the youth was rich, and consequently he was courted. Closer study revealed the fact that the youth had not said anything to give currency to the rumors as concerned his financial independence.

The Widow Braisted, although fully thirty years of age as the calendar counts, but about five-and-twenty as she counted, was particularly gracious to the handsome college graduate, Frank Benson. She actually haunted him, and the Monte-Cristo was not long in discerning that it was she who had started the stories as concerned his wealth. And the second discovery was made that the same widow was madly in love with the handsome youth of three-and-twenty.

Later on there came another discovery. The Monte-Cristo learned that the young man loved the fair girl previously alluded to as the younger daughter of the pretentious and ambitious parents, and he learned also that the love was mutual, though undeclared. Our hero determined to make the young man's acquaintance, as in the incidents and facts as disclosed he recognized a chance for the indulgence of his peculiar hobby.

No one within that great building noticed or spoke to our hero. He moved amid that chattering throng with less attention than a dog with shining coat would have received, and he was neglected because he looked like a poor man, and he

would have been even so neglected had it been known that he possessed all the heroic qualities, and was honorable and learned. Among the people where he found himself, worth is the standard for measurement, but it is what you are worth in bonds and stocks, and not in those excellent qualities that go to make up a true manhood or womanhood.

There was one person who had deigned to speak to our hero, and that person was Frank Benson. The meeting was accidental, but after a few words the young graduate appeared to discover that our hero was a superior man, despite his supposed lack of gold, and closer acquaintance revealed to our hero that the youth was a real good fellow, a genuine pearl amid a lot of burnished trash.

CHAPTER XIII.

SEVERAL times the Monte-Cristo had talked with the young man, and the result was that gradually he had "let himself out," as the term goes, until his young friend had become deeply impressed.

Around himself our hero threw an air of mystery that added to the awe in which young Benson regarded him.

One day the two were alone, seated on a rustic bench under the shadow of a tree that reared its branches high over a portion of the great stretch of lawn.

The Monte-Cristo had exercised his magnetic persuasiveness, and had led the young man to speak of himself and his hopes.

"You have a bright future before you," said our hero.

"Well, yes," replied the youth; "I feel that I have. The possession of health, strength, and education, coupled with a reasonable amount of energy and ambition, does appear to assure a bright future."

"You have other advantages," said the Monte-Cristo.

"I am not aware of any other advantages, save a firm belief in the teachings of a good mother and a determination to adhere to her sound precepts as a guide through life."

"But you owe something to your father."

The young man gave a start, and demanded:

"Did you know my father?"

"No."

A shadow fell over the youth's face as he said:

"I am glad you spoke without knowledge."

There was intense significance in the youth's tones, manner, and words.

"I merely alluded to the fact that your father had left you an advantage in having left you wealth."

"Wealth?" repeated the youth.

"Yes; you are rich?"

"Rich! No, sir, I am not rich; I have my fortune to make, and I can ill afford the time I am spending here. I have my fortune to make, sir; I am practically penniless."

"Are you aware that you are supposed to be very rich?"

"I was not so aware."

"It is generally believed around the hotel that you are a lucky young millionaire."

"I did not know that there was any such impression abroad. I have never said anything to create the impression; indeed, I have never spoken of my circumstances."

"The impression prevails, all the same, as I told you."

"I am sorry."

"I like you, Frank," said our hero.

"Thank you, sir; I return the liking."

"I wish you would look upon me as your friend. I may be of great service to you some day."

"I shall be proud to claim your friendship."

"Then we are to be friends?"

"With pleasure."

"I have seen a great deal of the world. I am a close observer, and my ears and eyes are always open. You will excuse me if I presume to take immediate advantage of our new-formed friendship and ask you what may appear an impertinent question."

"I will answer your question as coming from a friend."

"You are sure you will not be offended when I assert that it is fully in a friendly way that I ask the question?"

"I will so receive it."

"I wish to allude again to the fact that it is supposed you are rich. You say you never yourself said anything that would lead to the impression?"

"I never did."

"Have you ever proclaimed your lack of wealth?"

"I have never said anything about myself."

"To no one?"

A moment the young man hesitated; then he turned a little red in the face, but still did not answer.

"Come, remember I am a friend. Think me a friend of many years, and I will tell you frankly that it is possible your future destiny may hang, to a certain extent, upon this false impression confided in me."

"You have observed my course—you know my secret. You press your question on a suspicion?"

"I do."

"You have Miss Chamberlain in your mind?"

"I have."

"Do you think I have misled her as concerns my financial prospects?"

"No, I don't think you have misled her, but have you ever spoken of yourself to her?"

"Never directly."

"Indirectly?"

"Yes."

"Of your prospects?"

"Yes."

"What have you revealed?"

"I have always spoken in a manner to indicate that I was practically a penniless man and had my fortune to make."

"You never came right out and made the statement in so many words that you were a poor man?"

"No, sir."

"Do you think she believes you to be a rich man?"

"She can not think so."

"You are sure?"

"I am. But, sir, why are you so persistent in asking about this particular young lady?"

"Shall I speak frankly?"

"Yes, please."

"You love her?"

The young man colored, but remained silent.

"She loves you, at least I think she does. As to the intensity of her love, that depends upon whether she believes you to be poor or rich."

"You have forced yourself into my confidence, sir."

"We have agreed to be friends. I am your friend—your real friend."

"And you have known me but a few days."

"But a few days, that is true; but there are those toward whom we grow closely from the start. Now, listen to me. I have but one word to say for myself. When the time comes I can and will aid you. The time is coming when you will need a friend."

"You appear to have taken a great interest in me and my affairs."

"I have, and I will tell you why. I once went through the very experience you are now encountering. I was once a graduate just from college. Strangely enough, it became rumored that I was rich. I was courted and flattered, and then one day the *denouement* came. I had not known that I was supposed to be rich. I took all the attentions as rendered to my real merits, but, alas, it was a sad and painful awakening! I do take great interest in your affairs. I have watched you closely; I have read your character as I have gone on; all that I have learned has but confirmed my readings. I propose to be your friend, and know you will need one ere long."

"I am proud to have won your friendship."

"Good; and now a word in time. Do not let our friendship be known. We will act as mere passing acquaintances toward each other; we will only betray our friendship when we are alone. And now again, are you certain that Miss Chamberlain does not suspect you of being a rich man?"

"I can not see how she can suspect."

"She may."

"It can not be possible."

"We must make sure that she does not. You must carry the conversation some day so that she can not possibly be misled."

"I will do it."

"That is right. You will never regret your decision; and now one word more in confidence: When, where, and under what circumstances did you first meet the lady?"

CHAPTER XIV.

A MOMENT Frank Benson hesitated, and the Monte-Cristo again said:

"Remember, we are to be friends."

"It's strange!" muttered the youth.

"What is strange?"

"That you have acquired such influence over me. I admit that I am fascinated, and I hesitate. It may be that you are charming me as the snake charms the reluctant bird."

"I am glad to have you speak out thus frankly; it is better to come to a full understanding. I am a mysterious person; I possess great power—a power greater than emperors, for I can control them if I so desire. Yes, my power is marvelous."

The young man stared, and the idea flashed through his mind that he had been wasting time with a regular crank, and there came to his face an incredulous smile.

"You doubt my declaration?"

The youth thought best to humor the crank, and he said:

"No, not exactly; but yours is certainly a startling statement."

"It is a startling statement, but it is true."

"Whence comes this mysterious power, sir?"

"In good time you shall have evidence of my power—full evidence; but just tell me where and when you first met Miss Chamberlain."

The youth, deterred by his new suspicion, hesitated to answer. He did not think it best to confide his little romance to a crank, and indeed he regretted having given so much of his confidence. He said:

"I think I have given you sufficient of my confidence."

"No. Some new suspicion has found lodgment in your mind. You do not feel like trusting me; but you must trust me. Listen: you love Miss Chamberlain and she loves you. She is a worthy girl. I think you are a well-deserving young man. There is a dividing chasm between you and the lady you love. I am the only man able and willing to bridge that chasm; but if you are to have my friendship, I am to have your full confidence."

"I will speak fairly with you," said the youth.

"Do."

"You have alarmed me."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"You have made an incredible statement."

"You think so?"

"I do."

"Because I boasted of my power?"

"Yes."

"Well, I like your frankness; it increases my admiration for you; but I repeat the boast I made, and you will need the exercise of my power before Miss Chamberlain becomes your wife. And again let me say Miss Chamberlain must be put to a test, and she must stand the test before she can become your wife, at least through my assistance."

"Are you acquainted with Miss Chamberlain?"

"I never spoke to her in my life."

"Do you know aught concerning her?"

"I never saw her until I came here a few days ago."

"Nor did you ever see me before you arrived here?"

"Never to my knowledge."

"And yet you appear to take great interest in my romance?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"Some day I will tell you why, not now. But you must trust me."

The youth made no answer.

"I see. I have aroused your suspicions."

"Not as concerns your good intentions, but your judgment."

"My strange boast of power sticks in your crop?"

"Frankly, yes."

"Listen: the request I make is a simple one. It is a revelation you can make even to a crank. Come, tell me when and where, and under what circumstances you first met Miss Chamberlain."

"I met her first at a social gathering in New York."

"How long ago?"

"About six months ago."

"Have you ever declared your love to her?"

"Never."

"But you think she loves you?"

"I have dared hope that she does."

"She prefers your society?"

"Yes."

"That is a good sign. Now, let me tell you, I know she loves you."

"You know, sir?"

"I do."

"Whence gained you your knowledge?"

"From close observation. There is no doubt about the fact that she is at least inclined to love you; but there remains yet a test she must stand before we have the assurance that she loves you as a wife should love her husband."

"I do not understand what you mean?"

"She has been reared in a false atmosphere; her parents are purse-proud, worldly people, sordid people. Now, we must learn whether or not Miss Chamberlain resembles her parents."

"I can put her to no tests, sir, and I must decline your good offices in my behalf."

"Ah, no, you must not decline my good offices in your behalf! You are madly in love with that young lady. It may be that she is equally intensely in love with you, and yet there may be a dividing chasm."

"If she loves me and I love her, how can we be kept apart?"

"Her parents may have something to say. One fact I know: they are looking for a rich husband for their daughter. Mr. Chamberlain is not a rich man. Like thousands of others his riches are a mere pretense. He is playing a game, traveling on an impression. He will demand that the man who marries his daughter shall be rich."

"But can he control his daughter?"

"He may. Parents possess great influence over their children."

"You make it appear that my love is hopeless."

"As it stands, yes; and if you were not blinded by your passion you would see that I was speaking to you words of sense and soberness—pretty sound words to come from a crank."

"You must forgive me, sir, and not take so harsh a view of my incredulity."

"Oh, that is all right. You would be a gullible fool if you accepted my startling declaration without question. I know my claim is a marvelous one, but I repeat it, and when the proper time comes I can convince you that I make no false claim. I like you. It is fortunate for you that I do. I like Miss Chamberlain. As matters stand it is fortunate for her that I do. You must trust me and I will prove a friend, and you will need a friend, for in a few days you may have a bitter enemy assail you."

"A bitter enemy, sir?"

"Yes."

"I have no enemy, sir."

"No. A certain person at present is your friend, but an interested friend—self-interested. At any moment a discovery may be made, and this friend will become a bitter foe, and then you will run into rough water. You are supposed to be rich—very rich—and it is a woman who first started the rumor."

The young man gazed aghast.

"You are a strange man," he said.

"Yes."

"I can not think who can be my enemy."

"Ah, but remember I am an outside observer. Come now, here is a strange coincidence. Let's see if you can read the lesson. Possibly you can. Look here."

The Monte-Cristo pointed toward a passing figure.

CHAPTER XV.

It was the figure of a lady toward which the Monte-Cristo pointed, and as the youth glanced, he recognized the widow, Mrs. Braisted. A flush suffused his face, and our hero's keen eyes were fixed upon him, and a moment later his voice was heard as he said:

"Do coming events cast their shadows before, as you gaze on that lady?"

"You are a keen observer," said the youth, in a meditative tone.

"Yes; my observation takes a wide range. Miss Chamberlain loves you; but there is another who might love, and the other's love may prove dangerous. Remember, a woman scorned."

The youth did remember a great deal. He remembered that the widow almost haunted him; indeed, he would have

been blind had he not perceived that his society was very agreeable to the widow.

"Now you know whence you may have an enemy some day."

"It can not be possible."

"You are a keen youth."

"Thank you, sir."

"You have surely penetrated that woman's character."

"I dare not speak."

"I will. She is false as Satan; she is a dangerous woman; she is a poisonous viper—a pretender; she claims to be six-and-twenty; she is nearer six-and-thirty."

"Impossible!"

"It is true; and I know she is the person who has given it out that you are rich. When she hears of your avowed love for Miss Chamberlain she will become your bitter foe, and she will proclaim your poverty. She will not stop at this mere proclamation; she will blacken your character, she will become a biting serpent."

The youth had secretly discerned all that the Monte-Cristo declared, and he exclaimed:

"You are a wonderful man!"

"We will not talk about that. I desire to be your friend, and when the time comes I can pull out this woman's fangs; I can make harmless her malignant darts. I mean just what I say. Mine is no mere boast. I can ward off all the harm that creature would do you."

"And what would you have me do?"

"Are you prepared to follow my advice?"

"I am."

"Despite my weird and seemingly audacious boast?"

"Yes."

"It is well for you. Under any circumstances, as long as you preserve your integrity, I am your friend. And now I will advise you. The first thing for us to do is to find out whether Miss Chamberlain has deceived herself."

"I dare not put her to any test."

"The test is a simple one—yes, and one that your own manhood should demand."

"What is it?"

"She must be made to fully understand that you are a poor man."

"Must I go and tell her?"

"Yes."

"Would it not be impertinence on my part to do so?"

"It depends upon *how* you do it."

"How shall I do it?"

"Miss Chamberlain is always agreeable to take a stroll with you. To-night will be a beautiful moonlight night. You must ask her to take a walk, lead her to one of the beautiful summer-houses, and your own ingenuity will aid you in making the revelation."

"I will be too greatly embarrassed."

"You need not be. Listen: you can speak of your hopes and aspirations, then you can skillfully suggest that you fear some one has caused it to be believed that you are a rich man, and then you can tell the real facts as concerns your financial prospects."

"And then?"

"We will see how it affects Miss Chamberlain. If she does not really love you there will be a change in her manner. She will draw off from you and you will get an intimation that your special attentions are not really desired."

"Are you a friend or a secret enemy?"

"You must take me as a friend."

"You are a genuine Machiavelli."

"You will find me as a father to you."

"One more question: What result do you anticipate from this test?"

"Shall I tell you?"

"Yes, please."

"She will stand it like a true lady."

"How do you know?"

"I will risk my reputation as a prophet on the outcome."

"You really believe she loves me?"

"I do."

"Then what need to make the experiment?"

"There is much need."

"Why?"

"It is just possible that we are mistaken. Some women are very mysterious and past finding out. But in my own mind I know all will come out well."

"And the widow?"

The Monte-Cristo laughed as he said:

"She will furnish the material for the comedy that is to intersperse our more serious dramatic parts."

"You think she will become my enemy?"

"I do."

"But I need not undeceive her at present!"

"Ah, let me tell you something! She is becoming anxious. She will force you to undeceive her. She is already permitting the green flash of jealousy to glint in her eyes. She is but waiting for an opportunity to learn her fate."

"You amaze me by your revelations."

"I will amaze you still more by the positive proofs of my friendship ere long. And now remember our new-formed intimacy must be kept a secret. When Mrs. Braisted warns you against me, you must appear to accept the warning."

"You know her?"

"Yes."

"And she knows you?"

"No."

"I do not understand."

"I will explain. I never saw the woman until I came here. She knows not who I am, but she is a shrewd woman. She has discerned that I am her *bête noir*—her special antipathy. She hates me without knowing me. I despise her because I do know her, and I know her because I have read her through and through."

"You do mystify me."

"Never mind. You can consider yourself a fortunate man. Listen to me and mark well my words. Let Miss Chamberlain stand the test, and all is well. You shall in good time declare your love; her parents will object. Good! I will bend their will to mine as the reed can be bent, and we will have a grand surprise all round. And the most bitterly surprised party when the grand *denouement* comes will be the widow. And again you shall mark how well I know the premises. The widow will assail you for treating me with civility the very first time she gets an opportunity."

"And I will repel her interference."

"No, you must not at present. You must merely play the evasive rôle."

"This is all very strange to me."

"Stranger revelations are to come, my young friend."

"I must say one thing."

"Proceed."

"It will be bad for you if, after all, you should prove to be a treacherous and false friend."

"I will risk all consequences on that score."

"I am allowing you to shuffle the cards in a play for the happiness of my life."

"I am a sure dealer. You need not fear. I will win your happiness for you. I always play a winning game in cases like the present."

CHAPTER XVI.

WITHIN the hour one of the prophecies of the Monte-Cristo was verified. Frank and our hero separated. The former proceeded to the hotel, the latter wandered off amid the trees. Young Benson seated himself in a remote corner of the immense piazza, and was indulging in deep meditation, when a step was heard, a merry laugh, and a cheery voice demanded:

"What, asleep?"

The youth looked up, and the fascinating widow stood over him, and her skillfully painted face was wreathed in smiles.

"No, I was not asleep."

The widow took a seat beside him, and her smiles vanished and her face assumed a grave expression as she said:

"I will not offend you if I dare intrude my advice?"

"Certainly not."

"You will not think me impertinent?"

"Certainly not."

"I saw you with that Mr. Alka."

"Yes; I like to hear him talk."

"He is very fascinating, possibly."

"He is a good talker."

"So I have heard."

"Do you know him?"

"No; but I know of him."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; and I feel it my duty to tell you he is a very dangerous man, and no company for a young gentleman of your social position."

"You are very kind to warn me, Mrs. Braisted, but the

little I have to say to him can do me no harm. I run no risk, no matter who he is, as long as he is a guest of this hotel."

"If the proprietor knew the truth he would not remain a guest. He has no business in a hotel of this character."

"Then you know him?"

"No; I know of him."

"And is he a disreputable man?"

"A word to the wise is sufficient. I have warned you as a friend."

"I am really obliged for your interest in me."

"Yes, I am deeply interested in you," said the widow; and she cast one of her most fascinating glances upon him. The young man looked over toward the river that rolled beneath the hotel.

"Where is Miss Chamberlain this morning?" whispered the widow.

"I have not seen Miss Chamberlain this morning."

"She is a lovely girl," said the widow, in an earnest tone.

"Yes, a very lovely girl."

"I feel so sorry for her."

"So sorry, Mrs. Braisted?"

"Yes."

"Is she sick?"

"No; but—"

"You alarm me."

"Possibly you have not heard the facts?"

"What facts?"

"About her father."

"What about him? He appears to be a very nice gentleman."

"Ah, I ought not to tell!"

The young man remained silent. He did not show an inclination to encourage the designing and malignant woman to talk.

"It must be very mortifying to Miss Chamberlain," said the widow.

"I do not understand, madame."

A flush of indignation mantled the widow's face. She did not fancy the appellation of *madame*.

"You know it is generally supposed that Mr. Chamberlain is rich."

"I had supposed he was a man of large means."

"He is literally penniless, and it is all they can do to maintain themselves here in the hotel. I feel so sorry for Miss Chamberlain, for she is a real sweet girl."

"Yes, one of the loveliest girls I ever met, and her father can never be poor when he possesses such a daughter. She is a fortune to any parent."

The widow's eyes flashed.

"Ah, I see you are a great admirer of Miss Chamberlain?"

"I am," came the frank avowal.

"She is a very lovely girl, but still I can not excuse her for the little deceit."

"Excuse me, madame; I do not believe Miss Chamberlain is deceitful."

"Oh, you men are all alike!"

"In what particular?"

"You are so easily hoodwinked."

"Are you not a little spiteful, madame?"

"No, I am not; I detest insincerity and pretense."

"So do I."

"I know you do, and that is why I am so much surprised at your lack of discernment."

"Where do I lack discernment?"

"Miss Chamberlain believes you are rich, but that is no excuse."

"Excuse, madame?"

"Yes, excuse."

"For what?"

"Her flirtation. Now that I have been led to speak at all, I will speak right out."

"Is it a crime to flirt, madame?"

"It is, under certain circumstances."

"What are the circumstances that make a little flirtation a crime?"

"When a lady is married, or engaged to be married."

"What am I to infer?"

"Do you not know?"

"Know what?"

"Well, well, I had better stop!"

Frank was willing that she should stop. He did not encourage her to proceed, but she was determined to proceed all

the same. She would have liked it better if he had encouraged her, but as he did not, she said:

"After all, I believe it is my duty to speak."

The young man still maintained silence.

"I thought you knew it," she continued.

"Knew what?"

"That Miss Chamberlain has an *affaire*."

"I do not understand."

"She is engaged to be married. She expects her affianced here almost daily, and it will turn out very awkward, I am afraid. I am really sorry she has been so indiscreet."

"Is Miss Chamberlain engaged to be married?"

"Certainly she is."

"Is it generally known in the hotel?"

"Certainly not, or she would not dare to flirt so openly."

"You really know that she is engaged?"

"Certainly."

"Do you know the gentleman?"

"There, I can say no more. But she certainly has been very indiscreet."

"I can not see wherein your charge holds good."

"Oh, you can not?"

"No."

"Well, as you are the special favorite it is not to be supposed that you would."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Braisted, but I will ask a favor of you."

"Indeed!"

"You will not repeat to any one else what you have just revealed to me?"

"And why not, sir?"

"Because I believe you will do Miss Chamberlain a great injustice."

"A great injustice?" repeated the widow.

"Yes."

"How?"

"I think you have been misinformed."

"Misinformed?"

"Yes."

"As concerns what?"

"Miss Chamberlain's engagement."

"I am positive as to the truth of my statement."

"You are?"

"I am."

"Madame, I am just as positive that you are mistaken."

The woman gazed with starting eyes and pale face.

"Aha!" she murmured; "I did not know it had gone so far!"

"Do not misinform yourself now, madame?"

"About what?"

"Well, in plain language, would it not be wise if you were to mind your own business?"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE Monte-Cristo had told Frank Benson he would have an enemy, and the enemy was speedily discovered. After the prognostication the young man was deeply offended. He knew that Mrs. Braisted was manufacturing her statements out of the whole cloth; in fact, he knew that she was actually telling untruths, and in his anger he forgot his discretion and uttered the words with which we close the preceding chapter.

The rebuke was fully merited. The recital was the fabrication of a spiteful, interested, and vindictive woman, and the effect of his words were positive and immediate. The widow's dream was shattered, her own hopes and aspirations were blasted, and on the instant she became the woman scorned. She realized the fact. She was bright, smart, and cunning, and needed no interpreter. It came to her like a thunderclap, and although it stunned her, it also convinced her, and, as stated, the effect of the words were thrilling. Her handsome eyes flashed, her face flushed, her lips were set, and a shadow fell over her countenance.

"Thank you," she said, in easy tones.

"Excuse me, madame," said Frank; "I spoke hastily. I was really rude. I recall my words."

"Oh, you needn't recall them! I merit your rebuke, although I was acting the part of a friend, as I supposed. Really, it is none of my business, and you were justified in telling me so."

"But, madame, you are mistaken; some one has misled you."

"Have they?" came the query.

"Certainly yes."

"My information came very direct. I have not been misinformed, but *you* have been deceived."

Although she had lost all hope as far as she was concerned, the widow was not at all disconcerted. She was within the instant inspired with bitter feelings of vengefulness, and as her own interest ceased she became more reckless and spiteful, and she added:

"Of course, if you choose to be hoodwinked and played, it is your own business, and probably she has been aided by that fellow who appears to exercise such absolute control over you lately."

"Whom do you mean, madame?"

"Oh, between Miss Chamberlain and her confederate, Mr. Alka, you will be well played!"

"Madame, you certainly do not know what you are saying."

"Oh, yes, I do! I speak advisedly. I am not deceived. I can not be deceived. But you are. I told you Miss Chamberlain was engaged, and you told me to mind my own business. I will; and in doing so you will suffer from my silence, not I; and I will obey your injunction."

Frank was but a mere youth; Mrs. Braisted was an experienced and fascinating woman; and even the worst of women, when cunning and smart, can work much mischief and exert considerable influence. There came trouble to the youth's heart. It flashed over him that it was possible that he might be blinded; and again he thought, after all, that it might be well to hear what Mrs. Braisted had to say whether he was prepared to believe her statements or not.

"You speak very positively, Mrs. Braisted, when you say Miss Chamberlain is engaged."

"I do."

"Well, really, I can not say that it personally concerns me, but I had been led to believe differently."

There came a glitter in the woman's eyes as she answered:

"Of course you have been led to believe differently. Miss Chamberlain's real love is a poor man. You are supposed to be rich."

"She does not think I am rich."

"Oh, yes, she does!"

"But I have taken particular pains to inform her to the contrary."

"I know that."

"You know it, madame?"

"Yes."

"It is strange."

"No, it is not strange. Miss Chamberlain has seen fit to make me her confidante."

"Indeed."

"Yes; and I know that you told her that you were a poor man. But some one else told her that it was a hobby of yours to proclaim yourself a poor man. She was told that you had a romantic idea to be loved for yourself and all that stuff. She does not believe you. She believes the other statement."

"And you say, madame, that Miss Chamberlain herself informed you of her engagement?"

"She did."

"You will remember that I have no right to question Miss Chamberlain's doings, or to inquire into her private affairs."

"Ah, you can not deceive me! I have my eyes and ears. You love her, but you have not yet dared to proclaim your love for her, and she hardly dares to encourage you to do so, because she is not fully satisfied as to your wealth."

"But if she is already engaged?"

"What does she care about that? Of course, she admits she loves the other gentleman; but, alas, she also admits that she can not marry a poor man! Nor can she—her scheming parents would not permit it. But she is in full sympathy with her parents. She is a bright, smart girl. She is very prudent and cautious. She does not mean to be fooled."

"You amaze me, madame."

"I did not mean to say so much. I merely intended to give you a hint; but your rudeness has compelled me to say more than I first intended."

"Do you positively asseverate that Miss Chamberlain admitted to you that she was engaged?"

"She did."

"Do her parents know of her engagement?"

"No."

"It is a secret from them?"

"It is."

"And has she had a talk with you about me?"

"She has."

"It is strange."

"Are you aware that every one around this hotel believes you are a rich man—a young millionaire?"

"I never said anything to create such an impression."

"No; but some one did."

"Who?"

"Ah! I will not say."

"Do you suspect?"

"I know."

"Who?"

"I dare not tell."

"Please do."

"You will be much surprised."

"Please tell me."

"No; you think me an enemy."

"I dare not claim you as a friend."

"I will admit I felt very friendly toward you."

"Thank you, and permit me to claim your friendship."

"Do you really desire my friendship?"

"I desire any one's friendship."

"I will not tell you who started the story."

"You know, madame, I am not rich?"

"I did not suppose you were."

"And have you ever denied the report?"

"No."

"Why not?"

The widow smiled in a sardonic manner as she retorted:

"Because it was none of my business."

"Did you not try to disabuse Miss Chamberlain's mind?"

"I did not."

"Why not?"

"I did not know absolutely whether the report was true or false."

"Madame, I am a poor man, with my fortune to make."

CHAPTER XVIII.

AGAIN the widow smiled in a sardonic manner as she said:

"Do you expect to gain a fortune with Miss Chamberlain's love?"

"Madame, I do not deserve this; and furthermore, I have not admitted that I sought her love."

"Oh, yes, you have!"

"How?"

"Well, it is a fact; I know it to be true. And let me tell you something in a friendly way: you are a man who has the opportunity to marry a fortune."

"I am not seeking to marry a fortune."

"Indeed?"

"No, madame."

"Well, you are in the romantic state at this moment. Miss Chamberlain has bewitched you, and she is a bewitching woman when she seeks to be so."

At that moment a friend of the widow joined the party, and the conversation was closed, and a little while later Frank Benson excused himself and walked away. The young man was all cut up. Love is sensitive, and lovers are too ready to believe that which pricks their jealousy. The youth began to recall certain little incidents that served to sustain the widow's insinuations; and we will here state that a jealous soul can always discover little incidents to make the food it feeds upon. When jealousy is once aroused, everything comes in a distorted shape.

The young man sauntered down the lawn, and a second time encountered the Monte-Cristo, and when the meeting took place the youth was in an ill-tempered mood.

"Aha!" exclaimed our hero, "you've started the game."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"The enemy."

"I do not understand."

"Then you are not as bright and discerning as usual."

"Will you explain?"

"Certainly."

"Do so."

"You have met the widow?"

"How do you know?"

"I knew she would lie in wait for you when you separated from me. And I walked off down the lawn to give her a chance, and I knew that immediately after the interview you would come stalking along here in a wretched mood."

"You know so much, possibly you know what she said?"

"I do."

"Were you listening, sir?"

"You know better."

The youth did know better. For while talking with the widow he had seen our hero pacing under the trees a quarter of a mile away, and down the lawn.

"So you think you can guess what she said?"

"We will call it a guess."

"What did she say?"

"Oh, a number of things!"

"That is very indefinite."

"I know it; but I will be more definite; but first I will say to you that the most she told you was false."

The youth glared.

"How can you say it was false when you are only guessing what she said?"

"But I am guessing correctly."

"What did she say?"

"Shall I tell you?"

"Yes, if you please."

"She told you that Miss Chamberlain thought you were rich."

The youth colored.

"Yes, she did; but that is easily guessed."

"Why?"

"Because I believe she told me the truth."

"Oh, you do?"

"I do."

"Then you are a fool."

"Be careful, sir!"

The Monte-Cristo smiled, and said:

"It will not do to get mad twice this morning."

"What do you mean?"

"You were mad at the widow. You were really rude."

The young man started and gazed in amazement, and the Monte-Cristo continued:

"She made you believe, I fear, that Miss Chamberlain is a deceitful and designing girl."

"Sir, will you tell me why you take so much interest in Miss Chamberlain?"

"Because she is a noble girl."

"Possibly she is engaged to love you?"

The Monte-Cristo smiled—smiled for two reasons. He had got onto a fact, and he was amused.

"I never spoke to Miss Chamberlain in my life."

"You never did?"

"I have just said so. And now see here, my young friend; you are made of putty; the widow has dented you all over at the first broadside; but I tell you as a friend that all she told you is false."

"What did she tell me, sir?"

"Oh, I know!"

"It is easy to say you know. Why do you not repeat her information?"

"Shall I?"

"Certainly."

"She told you Miss Chamberlain was engaged to be married to another fellow; that she was holding two strings to her bow; that her affianced was poor; she believed you to be rich; and if she got you, she would shake the other fellow. That is what she told you."

It was a clear case of supposition and facial reading that guided the Monte-Cristo, but, as our readers know, he was right in his wonderfully correct conjectures. Of course, after having made the first successful guess, the youth's varying facial expressions served as an open guide-book, and he proceeded right ahead.

The effect of his keen perceptions upon the youth was remarkable. He gazed like one dazed. He was paralyzed with wonder and astonishment.

"It would seem," he said, "that you had really listened."

"I did not."

"And you appear to know all that passed."

"I do. I told you I was a strange man, and possessed strange powers. Now let me tell you all the widow told you is false. She fabricated every statement, and I will prove it within a few hours. You dissipated all her hopes, and she is animated by a spirit of revenge. She is the woman scorned of whom I warned you; she is the enemy of whose nearness I foretold. I will tell you more: she is the person who started the story of your great wealth, and she will be the one who,

in good time, will start the contradicting rumor. I know her well."

"Why should she be my enemy?"

"She fancies you herself. She has learned this morning that she can not win against a younger and more worthy lady, and she will be the foe of both."

Young lovers are very variable in their moods, and at once the youth recalled incidents that led him to perceive that what the Monte-Cristo said was possibly true.

"Can it be possible?" he ejaculated.

"It is possible, and true."

"Can it be that a lovely woman can be so false?"

"A woman is only lovely when her character accords with her beauty of feature. Mrs. Braisted is a very unlovely woman; she is a designing, ambitious, wicked, heartless woman, and she is your bitter enemy."

"She can do me no harm."

"She would do you harm if I were not here to offset her machinations. Why, already she had succeeded. You were thinking of running away, despite the compact of friendship you made with her."

The youth fairly recoiled.

"Are you the devil?" he exclaimed.

"Devils are not usually engaged in defeating their own imps, please remember. No, no, my lad, I am not the devil; and in the end you will find me indeed just the opposite."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE extraordinary magnetism of our Monte-Cristo was wonderful. He did appear to cast a spell about those with whom he came in contact. He possessed both a psychological and mesmeric power. He held his subjects in a spell. Young Frank Benson was once more under his spell, and the young fellow appeared to realize it. He could not release himself. He was charmed and enthralled, and yet cold suspicions ran through his mind, and he was really uncomfortable; his emotions were varying. He seemed to appreciate the truth of what his new friend said. He was amazed at his keen perception, and mystified by his singular faculty of procuring facts.

"The Monte-Cristo appeared to know all that had passed between young Benson and the widow, and to the lad this was wonderful; and yet, after all, to those possessed of keen perceptive faculties, the mystery is easily explained. It was but a marvelous detective talent, a fully developed muscle-reading power, and a quick comprehension of incidents and probabilities, enabling one thus gifted to crystallize and present in connected form events and possibilities.

After a moment's silence Frank said:

"You do not believe what the widow said?"

"I have so intimated."

"You do not believe Miss Chamberlain is engaged?"

"I know better."

"You do not believe that she considers me a rich catch?"

"I am so persuaded."

"How am I to learn the truth?"

"Carry out our original plan."

"I must invite Miss Chamberlain to walk to-night?"

"Yes."

"And then plainly tell her I am a poor man?"

"Yes."

"And what then?"

"We will wait and watch events."

"There is one more thing to be considered."

"Well?"

"Suppose she is true and good?"

"Well?"

"And loves me?"

"Yes."

"Our talk may bring about an understanding."

"That is what you have been playing for, is it?"

"No."

"Indeed?"

"I had no intention of declaring my love for her."

"You surprise me."

"I had a good reason."

"What is your reason?"

"My poverty. I have no right to gain her love and ask her to wait for me, and I can not get married now. I have my fortune to make."

"Why have you lingered here?"

"I have done wrong; but I could not help it. I am held in a charmed spell."

"You were very selfish."

"How?"

"You were thinking all this time of yourself only. You have not thought of Miss Chamberlain."

"You are right."

"You have gone too far already."

"I fear so. What shall I do?"

"Go ahead."

The young man gazed in amazement.

"I can not go ahead."

"Why not?"

"It would be a sin to ask her to become my wife."

"It would be a greater sin to desert her."

"Would it be desertion?"

"Certainly."

"I have not declared myself."

"Yes, you have."

"No, no!"

"Indeed you have."

"Not directly."

"No, but by your looks and your attentions. No, no, you can not desert her now."

"I do not know what to do."

"It is but fair to let her know that you were not deceiving her."

"But she can not now accept me."

"That may be."

"And it would be wrong to ask her to give up her prospects subject to my success in life."

"You think so?"

"I do."

"You are very considerate just now; but you knew all these facts before. You should have practiced your kindly considerations before."

"I know it. But, alas, the love dream carries us along! We are not ourselves. We go too far ere we awake to the real situation."

"You are right, my young friend. I know just how it is."

"Would it not be better for me to fold my tent, like the Arab, and silently steal away?"

"No."

"Are you my friend?"

"I am—better now than ever."

"Why?"

"Because you have been so frank, and, at the last moment, so considerate."

"And you urge me to this interview?"

"I do."

"Considering what possibilities hang upon it?"

"Yes."

"And suppose she really loves me?"

"You are a lucky fellow, that's all."

"But I am penniless."

"I know it."

"What can I say to her?"

"Propose marriage."

"Never."

"Why not?"

"I'd not ask a lady to share my poverty."

"Trust me."

"Trust you?"

"Yes."

"But how can my trust in you better my financial condition?"

"That is a problem."

"It is."

"Let me in good time solve it."

The young man looked at the Monte-Cristo in a puzzled manner. There was a singular significance in our hero's tones.

"I do not know what to do," said Frank.

"I have told you. Remember I told you I had a power that would permit me to sway even kings and emperors. Mine was no idle boast."

"It is not power I need, but money."

"Such power as mine may solve the money question."

The youth did not know what to make of his strange and eccentric friend. He looked him over. His clothes were not of the best. He wore no jewelry. He lodged in the meanest room in the house. He was not supposed to have a cent beyond his actual needs.

"You perplex me."

"Of course I do."

"I am at fault."

"You need not be. Follow my advice, and all will come out right."

"This is all very strange."

"Yes, I am a strange man, and this is not the first time I have given strange advice; but every time those who took it and acted upon it came out all right."

Frank began to feel rather awe-stricken. There was a realization that this strange man did possess some singular powers. One other fact struck the youth. His new friend was seemingly advising so that an acceptance of the advice appeared to accord with what was for the best and in consonance with his own real desires and hopes.

A moment Frank meditated, and then said:

"I'll do it."

"What?"

"Go it blindly."

"How?"

"I will act according to your advice."

"Good! And once having so determined, do not falter."

"I will not."

"You will go straight ahead?"

"I will."

"So much the better for you. In time you will thank me with tears of joy in your eyes."

CHAPTER XX.

"I WILL take the walk to-night."

"And then you will have the conversation?"

"I will; but I tell you it will lead to serious consequences, I fear."

"You fear?"

"Yes."

"You should say you hope."

"I would were it not for my poverty."

"Oh, never mind that; we will step forward, and count the second step after the first is taken. And now, see here: if you are satisfied she loves you, propose."

"Propose to her to share my poverty?"

"Yes."

"I can not do that."

"You have some prospect?"

"Yes."

"You will have some income within a year?"

"Yes, I trust so."

"Enough to enable you to live in a moderate way with a wife?"

"Yes; but remember, Miss Chamberlain has not been accustomed to living in a moderate way."

"If she really loves you as a wife should love a husband she will live for you, and the mere sacrifice of the hollow pleasures of fashionable life will not be much of a sacrifice."

"You are urging me on to a rash course."

"I will be responsible for all consequences."

"But you are but a recently found friend."

"Never mind."

"Your power over me consists in the fact that your advice runs in accord with my inclination."

"Well?"

"It is therein I see the danger."

The Monte-Cristo smiled as he answered:

"That is a truly philosophic reply, and it is true under ordinary circumstances. From that very fact I might be a very dangerous adviser. You know that is the underlying secret of Satan's great success in winning men from paths of virtue. He leads them by their inclination; but I am not Satan nor am I satanic. I kill evil. I hate wrong, on my oath. I know I am advising you rightly. I know that I am justified in offering to stand responsible for all circumstances."

The Monte-Cristo spoke in such a severe and earnest tone Frank was deeply impressed.

"It is strange," he said, "I should have won so good a friend."

"No, it is not strange, as you will learn some day. It was lucky fate led me. Our meeting was a lucky incident, and will come out right in the end."

"I will never again question what you propose."

"Not even though the widow may throw her deadly spell around you once more?"

"No."

"Now listen. If all goes as I expect to-night you will need this."

As the Monte-Cristo spoke he offered the youth a ring—a peculiar circlet with a gem glistening in its crown so wonderfully brilliant that its light was as piercing, figuratively speaking, as a cold steel poniard.

"What is that?" asked Frank.

"The engagement-ring. Take it and look at it."

The youth did not offer to take the ring; in fact he turned pale and trembled.

"Why do you not take it?"

The youth looked in the Monte-Cristo's eyes; they glittered as strangely as did the gem.

"No, no; I will not take it."

"Why not?"

"I don't know why not, but I had not better take it."

"Yes, you must."

"It will not be my gift."

"Yes, it will. I give it to you; it is yours absolutely; and if the lady does not take it and wear it, throw it into the river."

"And you can afford to give such advice?"

"Certainly."

"You can afford to throw away such a priceless gem?"

"Certainly."

"Ah! what have I done?"

There crept over the youth a feeling of real superstitious fear. He was a strong-minded youth, but there was something so strange and uncanny about the gift of the ring he did not know what to do.

"Dismiss all fear and take the ring."

"I can not accept such a gift; it is very valuable. I am a connoisseur in gems. That is an almost priceless jewel."

"And it is yours."

"How can you afford to part with it?"

"See here; I have others."

The Monte-Cristo showed other gems, and all of them of rare brilliancy and great value.

"Remember," resumed our hero, "you promised to follow my advice blindly."

"I promised to accept your advice, not your gifts."

"That is all right; they go together. You can not avail yourself of my advice unless you accept my gifts."

"And I must take this gem?"

"Yes."

"I tremble at doing so."

"Never mind; fortune smiles on you. Possibly you were born under a lucky star."

"It would seem so."

"Take the jewel."

"Oh, tell me who and what you are!"

"I am not a devil."

The youth did not answer.

"Mark well my words; you know you are an honest youth."

"I trust I am."

"You know that Miss Chamberlain is an honest, sincere, and pure girl, and she is also beautiful."

"Yes."

"What am I urging you to do—wrong her?"

"No."

"I am urging you to make her your wife?"

"Yes."

"I am not asking you to take advantage of the love you have won!"

"No, no!"

"That would be the plan of a devil. I am beating off the devil, in fact two devils, his arch Satanic Majesty and his unconscious female subject—the widow."

"I really do not know what to do."

"You said you would go it blindly?"

"I did."

"The more you trust me the better it is for you; the more I am compelled to urge you to accept your good fortune, just in proportion to that urgency you lessen your good chances."

"Your words are plain, although there is a mystery about you and all you suggest."

"Will you take the ring?"

"I will."

"And bestow it?"

"Yes, if the occasion offers; but how can I plead poverty and show so great wealth in my first gift?"

"This gift is not to be made until the fair lady has well stood the test."

"Ah, I see!"

"Yes; you must see, too, that you must be fully assured that she is true and sincere."

"I will."

"And give her the jewel?"

"It may mislead her still."

"No, no!"

"She may, after all, believe that I am playing for a genuine love."

"Let her believe what she chooses, so long as we establish that you have now a genuine love."

"You are my good—or bad adviser; but I will follow your advice."

"Yes, go ahead; there are rich surprises in store for you."

CHAPTER XXI.

OUR Monte-Cristo gave the young man some further specific advice and then bid him good-day.

Night came. It was a glorious night. The old hotel, perched as it was on a cliff overhanging the Hudson, looked under the moonlight like some grand baronial castle, and the gay people promenading the balconies, and the lights, and the music, and the gay festivities carried out the delusion.

Some of the joyous guests were dancing. Frank Benson entered the parlors, and as he did so he passed close to where the widow sat surrounded by a number of ladies and gentlemen. She always managed to be thus surrounded when in the public parlors. She tried to be a social leader, and her "cheek" and "push" made her a partial success.

Frank had noticed a lack of cordiality on the part of many of the pretentious people, who up to that day had made so much of him, and several young ladies who had courted even a passing promenade with him, or who went into ecstasies over the favor of a polka, rather sidled from him and looked askance.

The youth noticed the change, and beheld in it the hand, or, rather, the tongue of the widow; but he was rather pleased than otherwise. There was but one among all the guests of that house who could have caused his heart to bleed, and that was the beautiful Blanche Chamberlain.

As the youth passed where the widow sat he heard her remark:

"It is singular how the idea got abroad that he was rich. I guess he started it himself. You see, it is a trick of adventurers."

The youth knew the spiteful remark was intended for him, and, as stated, he was more than pleased. He determined to make his first test.

He crossed the room to where Miss Chamberlain sat, and he asked her to dance. She arose with a bright smile upon her face. There was no change in her manner, and she was a beautiful girl, and they were a handsome couple as they whirled around in the mazy dance.

Frank was aware of many comments, but he did not mind it. He was in a reckless mood. He had resolved, under the advice of his strange friend, to "cross the Rubicon" that night; and his heart was glad to know that Blanche stood the first test so well, for she could not but have heard the same stories that had caused the coldness to gleam in the eyes of others. Indeed, it seemed to him as though she was particularly gracious.

The dance was concluded, and as the pair started to promenade, the girl's name was called in a sharp tone.

Both looked up, and Miss Chamberlain's mother's face was seen beneath the lace curtains of one of the windows opening upon the balcony.

"I want you, Blanche."

"Excuse me a moment," said the girl.

"One moment, Blanche; will you meet me later?"

"Meet you?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"On the balcony."

"I will, certainly; but it seems a strange request."

"Why?"

"Your tone is so strange."

"I desire that you take a stroll with me."

"I will."

"You promise?"
"I do."
"Your mother may not consent."
"You have something to say to me?"
"I have."
"I think I know what it is. You shall have the privilege."
"I thank you."
"No, no, do not thank me; and listen: I do not believe one word that is said."
"Blanche!" came the mother's voice, in a sharper tone.
"Yes, mamma, I am coming. I will meet you in an hour."
"On the lawn?"
"Yes."
"In the summer-house over the cliff?"
"Yes."
"Please come?"
"I will."

The beautiful girl glided away. Frank turned and his glance fell upon Mrs. Braisted. The widow's eyes were fixed upon him, and there was a wicked glitter in her light orbs.

Frank passed out to the balcony. He walked along to a remote corner, lighted a cigar, and sat lost in thought. A moment passed, and he heard the rustle of a dress; he looked up and Mrs. Braisted stood near him.

"Good-evening."
"Ah! good-evening, madame."
The young man delighted in calling the widow madame, and he emphasized the appellation.
"I see you are still under the spell."
"What spell?"
"Under the spell of Miss Chamberlain's charms."
"Well, yes; I am."
"You did not heed my warning?"
"No."
"I have a revelation to make."
"Indeed?"
"Yes."
"Well?"
"You have an enemy in this hotel."
"Have I?"
"Yes."
"Well I know it."
"Ah! you do?"
"Yes."
"Possibly you can identify your foe?"
"I can."

"You are fortunate; it is not often that we can identify secret enemies."

"I have a particular talent for so doing."
"Your enemy has revealed your secret."
"Indeed?"
"Yes."
"Well, I thought so."
"The story of your poverty has been given out."
"Has it?"
"It has."

The young man laughed, and said:
"This is good!"
"It does not appear to disturb you."
"No—because such a rumor will further my purpose."
"You have a purpose?"
"I have."

The young man was acting under instructions.
"I am glad you are not annoyed."
"I am delighted."
"The rumor will reach Miss Chamberlain."
"By George! that is excellent. See here, Mrs. Braisted, you did promise me your friendship."

"Oh, yes, I did!"
"I can claim a good office at your hands?"
"What would you have me do?"
"You are a great authority here."
"Am I?"
"Yes."
"You flatter me."
"Oh, no!"
"Well?"
"You can really do me a great favor."

"Name it?"
"Take the first opportunity to confirm to Miss Chamberlain the stories that are in circulation as concerns me."
The widow's eyes flashed.
"You are rude."

"No, no!"
"Yes, sir, you are."
"I do not mean to be."
"There is insinuation in your request."
"No, madame. Listen: I really desire that you shall do as I request, and I wish you would do all you can to confirm the rumor, and I will let you into my secret. I will make a confidante of you."
"You have a secret?"
"I have."
"Will you reveal it?"
"Yes."
"Do so."
"I am a millionaire."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE widow's eyes bulged. She had started the first rumor without having any basis for her tale. She had started the second on a mere suspicion.

"You are very kind to confide in me."
"Not at all, madame; you have been very kind to me."
"I did like you."
"Ah! but I trust you will not speak in the past tense. I hope you still like me."
"You have been very rude to me."
"Not intentionally."
"I told you the facts as concerned Miss Chamberlain, and that appears to have given you offense; and what is more 'ou do not believe my statement."
"I did not say so, madame."
"You did, certainly."
"I beg your pardon; I merely suggested that you had been misinformed."

The widow was in a quandary. She did not know how to act. She had come to the young man intending to say many bitter things, but his singular revelation had disarmed her. Indeed, it had kindled afresh the hopes she once indulged.

The real fact was: the widow was a financial impostor. She pretended to be wealthy, but in reality she was poor. Her husband had left her a moderate cash balance, which, if put at interest, would have yielded her but a living income. She had determined upon a bold deal. She was drawing on her principal, trusting to luck and success in securing another husband.

She had fallen madly in love with Frank Benson, but really believing he was poor, she had met her disappointment with greater indifference. But when she learned that he was rich—ay, a millionaire—her passion returned; and what was more, she realized that he was all that she desired as her second choice; and within that moment she desired, at all hazards, to prevent his securing the hand of Miss Chamberlain.

Had she been playing against the lovers alone, she might might have won; but she was playing against that master of intrigue, our Monte-Cristo, a man who never lost a point, and whose wonderful perceptive faculties, and other mental gifts, enabled him to move with a dead certainty every time.
"I was not misinformed," said the widow, in answer to the young man's apologetic statement. "My information came to me direct. Miss Chamberlain has seen fit to make me her confidante."

"And you accepted her confidence?" said the youth, in a meaning tone.

"She forced it upon me," answered the widow, blushing.
"Answer truly, madame."
"Do not call me madame."
"Why not?"

"You should know. It makes me so old. I am but an artless girl in fact, although the fates have made me a widow."

"What shall I call you?"
"Mrs. Braisted."
"Very well. Mrs. Braisted, tell me truly, did Miss Chamberlain admit to you that she was engaged to be married?"
"She did."
"It is but fair to inform you that I shall seek an explanation."

The widow turned pale, but answered promptly:
"Of course she will deny it."
"Then whose word must I accept?"
"I can prove the truth of my declaration."
"And why should you be so anxious to do so?"
"To save you from becoming the dupe of a designing wom-

an. Miss Chamberlain, after all, is a woman. She assumes the rôle of being in her teens, but she is a year older than I. She has confessed as much."

"Of course; meaning that you should repeat her confession?"

Again the widow turned pale. In her eagerness she had gone too far, and realized her mistake. She determined to change the subject, and she said:

"What purpose have you in concealing the fact of your wealth?"

"I do not wish to fall into the hands of a designing woman. I wish to escape becoming a dupe."

"Ah, if you would only trust me," said the widow, in a tone of persuasive magnetism, "I would save you."

"I am prepared to be saved."

The young man looked at his watch. The hour approached when he was to meet Blanche. He desired to get away, but the widow had taken a seat beside him.

"You have an enemy in this house," she said.

"Yes; I am aware of it."

"So I warned you before."

"I remember."

"And you made the same reply."

"I did."

"Have you established the identity of your foe?"

"I think I have."

"I can aid you."

"Can you?"

"Yes."

"Do so."

"You would not believe me."

"Why not?"

"How long have you known that Mr. Alka?"

"I met him first here."

"You never knew him before?"

"Never."

"You are under his influence."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I have watched you."

"Well?"

"He is a dangerous man."

"You are sure?"

"I am."

"I believe you."

"And yet you continue your intimacy with him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I admire him."

"But you know his character."

"I suspect it."

"He is advising you."

"How do you know?"

"I suspect it."

"Well?"

"He does not claim an acquaintanceship with Miss Chamberlain?"

"No."

"You would be surprised to learn that they were confidential friends?"

"I would."

"I can prove it to you."

"When you do you will make to me a wonderful revelation."

"That man has no right to remain in a hotel of this kind."

"Why not?"

"I know, and were it not for your intimacy, I would expose him and have him ordered away."

"What difference does my intimacy make?"

"If he were exposed it might reflect back upon you."

"Do not spare me."

The young man arose.

"Wait; do not go," pleaded the widow.

"I am sorry to go; you are so entertaining."

"I wish to tell you something."

"You will have to defer your communication. I am sorry, but I have to meet a gentleman."

"And you refuse to remain and listen to me?"

The widow's eyes flashed.

"I think you should accept my excuse."

"I wish to have a long talk with you."

"I am at your service to-morrow."

"To-morrow may be too late."

A suspicion flashed through Frank Benson's mind. He discovered that the widow had an inkling of his intended stroll. She was deliberately seeking to keep him away and cause him to break his appointment, and at the same time he resolved, if possible, to throw her off the scent. He said:

"Mr. Alka has promised me a revelation to-night. I am under engagement to meet him."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE widow evidently feared she was to be baffled, and she grew exceedingly nervous.

"You must not meet him," she said.

"But I have promised."

"You must not meet him until after you have heard what I have to say."

"I certainly must excuse myself."

The young man stepped away. The widow rose and walked toward the parlor window. She was greatly excited. She glanced through the window and her eyes fell upon Miss Chamberlain. There came a malignant glance to her eyes, and a sardonic smile illumined her face as she muttered:

"What a fool I am! I can defeat her yet."

She passed through the window, crossed the parlor, and came upon Miss Chamberlain just as the latter had thrown a light wrap over her shoulders, and was stepping out to the piazza. The widow laid her hand on the young lady's shoulder and, in her most fascinating tone, said:

"How lovely you look!"

Miss Chamberlain blushed. She feared the widow and had avoided her. There had really never existed any intimacy between them. They evidently disliked each other, and the widow's sudden compliment was a surprise.

The widow drew Miss Chamberlain back to the parlor. The latter was really annoyed, but did not dare betray her annoyance. She feared the widow—feared to arouse her hostility, and she had been well pleased that there should exist between them only the most formal acquaintanceship. The young lady also knew that it was time for her to go if she intended to keep her appointment.

"It is so warm!" she said; "if you will excuse me I will step out on the piazza."

"I have been looking for you all the evening," said the widow.

"Indeed?"

"Yes, you must come with me—come to my room; I have a revelation to make to you."

Blanche turned pale. She dreaded missing her appointment. She dreaded going to the widow's room.

"If you will excuse me," she said, "I will come to your room in the morning."

"No; you must come now."

Blanche did not know what to do, and the widow said:

"I will keep you but a moment."

The young lady could spare a moment, and she permitted herself to be led to the elevator by the siren. A moment later and they were in the widow's room. The latter locked the door, invited Blanche to a seat, and heaved a sigh of relief. The sigh was simulated, and her actions were singular, and Miss Chamberlain gazed in astonishment.

"You are saved!" ejaculated the widow, in a semi-dramatic tone.

"Saved!" repeated the young lady.

"Yes."

"I do not understand."

"No, no; nor do you understand your peril, Miss Chamberlain. You do not like me, you never have liked me, and you have avoided me. I have been conscious of your dislike, and had I been like most people I would not have raised my hand to save you."

"Madame, will you explain?"

"Yes, I mean to explain. You are saved, if you will be saved, and I will keep your secret. I am your friend, as one virtuous woman should be the friend of another woman."

Blanche was pale as death; she trembled like an aspen leaf, and, in a husky voice, she asked:

"Will you please explain your extraordinary remarks?"

"I will."

"Please do so."

"You were to meet a gentleman to-night?"

Blanche gave a start, and the widow amended with the statement:

"I mean a man who is posing as a gentleman."

"This is extraordinary, madame."

"What is extraordinary?"

"That you should know of my movements."

"You do not deny what I charge?"

"I was to meet a gentleman and take a stroll in the moonlight with him. Is there any harm in that?"

"No, there would be no harm under ordinary circumstances; but does it not strike you as strange that I should know of this appointment?"

"It does."

"Listen. Although you have betrayed such a decided dislike of me, I have humiliated myself to play a part for your safety. I knew of your appointment; the information came to me from the gentleman with whom you had the tryst."

"Can it be possible?" ejaculated Blanche.

"Certainly. How else would I know of the intended meeting? You did not tell, and the appointment was made within the hour."

"I do not understand all this, Mrs. Braisted."

"I will explain. When Mr. Frank Benson came to this hotel he did not know I was here; but as fate would have it, I was the first person he met. He came to me, and on his knees begged me not to betray him. He is such a handsome fellow, and appealed so fervently, I foolishly promised, but not until he assured me that he had reformed."

The face of Blanche became like that of a corpse.

"Yes," continued the widow, "I promised, and I would have kept my promise had not the emergency arrived when it was necessary for me to break it in order to save a reputable lady and her family from disgrace."

"Oh, what have you to disclose?" murmured Blanche, in a husky voice.

"Wait and I will tell you; but you must promise me on your oath not to betray me. You can take advantage of my disclosure to save yourself, but you must never, on your life, reveal whence you got your information, or even what your information is. Will you promise?"

Blanche did not answer, and the widow proceeded:

"Frank Benson has been compelled to make a confidante of me all along, and I have found it hard to keep his secret; but, after all, the fellow has good qualities, and had he kept his promise I would not have betrayed him. He has driven me to the exposure, but he must never know that I have made it."

"And was it he told you of our tryst?"

"He did tell me."

"Why did he tell you?"

"I had forbidden his attentions to you."

"You had forbidden them?"

"Yes; and in your interest I sought to save you without exposing him; but when that other wretch came here I was compelled to play against the most dangerous man in the world."

"To whom do you allude, Mrs. Braisted?"

"That man Alka. Do you not observe his intimacy with Frank Benson?"

"Yes, I have seen them together."

"That man is a villain."

"A villain, madame?"

"Yes, a real villain."

"And Frank?"

"Frank is not a villain, but he is not the man with whom you must keep a secret tryst."

"Oh, what have you to reveal?"

"One thing you must remember: I am really disinterested. It is only through a feeling of common love for our sex that I make the revelation to you."

"What have you to reveal?"

"You must prepare yourself for the terrible disclosure."

CHAPTER XXIV.

BLANCHE had been wrought up to a condition of nervousness bordering upon hysterics.

"Oh, spare me!" she ejaculated, in a wild tone.

"Spare you?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"The revelation."

"And will you rush madly on to disgrace?"

"No, no!"

"I have gone so far I must proceed. As I told you, Frank recognized me when he came here. I knew him as a boy, and that is why I permitted him to persuade me. Blanche, you must promise to keep my secret."

"I will."

"You will never reveal what I tell you now?"

"I will not, unless it should be demonstrated that you are laboring under a terrible mistake."

"Ah, that will not do!"

"I can not promise more."

"But should Frank come to you—should he suspect that I had betrayed him, and so say, you would betray me?"

"No, no; I will wait for the proof!"

"You will promise that?"

"I will."

"Enough; I will tell you all. It is believed that Frank Benson is a millionaire."

"No, no; I know better. He has told me himself that he had his fortune to make."

"He told you that?"

"Yes."

"And you did not believe him to be a rich man?"

"I did not."

"Well, that was at least fair on his part."

"Yes; he always gave me to understand that he was poor."

"And yet you know it is understood in the hotel here that he is rich."

"Not now. It is rumored now that he is poor."

"Who started the latter rumor?"

The girl did not answer.

"Do you know?"

"I have heard."

"Indeed! To whom is the rumor attributed?"

"To you!"

The widow started. She thought she had covered her tracks better, but there is a good deal of the ostrich head legend in the wiles of women after all.

"You understood that I started the rumor?"

"Yes."

"It is false! I have said nothing about it; but you must know the truth. Frank is not only penniless, but he is a gambler—a professional gambler, and his intimate friend, that Alka, is a professional thief and confidence man, and how far Frank is mixed up with him I do not know."

Mrs. Braisted's last words fell upon closed ears. Blanche had fallen back on the sofa in a dead faint. The widow stood over her and applied remedies, and as she did so she looked indeed like a handsome fiend. Her face beamed with triumph as she saw that the scheme of her coming here had proved a success. Indeed, in a double sense had she triumphed. It did not take long to restore Blanche to consciousness, but, oh, what a change had come over her appearance!

"Poor, dear girl," said the widow, caressingly, "it is hard to wound you thus, but it is your salvation from disgrace. I never suspected it had gone so far. I never suspected that you loved this man so."

Blanche was about to make a reply, but there came a sudden crash against the room door. The widow turned pale, and her countenance assumed a guilty look. Blanche noted both facts, and a certain suspicion flashed through her mind, and a faint hope arose in her heart. The frightened look that came to the widow's crafty face was a sort of second revelation, and one that was very suggestive.

"Remember," said Mrs. Braisted, "you are not to betray me."

"I will remember my promise."

A change had come over Blanche, and there was a decided change in her tone of voice as well as her manner.

The widow glanced at her intended victim, and said:

"Your promise was very comprehensive. Under no circumstances are you to betray the information you have received, or from whom you received it."

"I beg your pardon," said Blanche, in a cold tone.

"What do you mean?"

"I remember my exact words when making the promise."

"What were your exact words, please?"

"I said I would keep your secret unless I received proofs that you were mistaken, or possibly knowingly wrong."

The widow's face grew black.

"How dare you?" she demanded.

"Dare what?"

"To insinuate that I have told what is false."

"I have not so insinuated."

"What motive could I have in telling so monstrous a lie?"

"I can not see that you would have any motive."

"Blanche, I have sought to save you, and I have also sought to save myself from incurring that man's enmity. It is not the enmity of Frank I fear, but that other man."

"Mr. Alka?"

"Yes."

The widow had struck a good lead. Her terror was explained, and the poison of her malicious revelation sunk deep into her intended victim's heart.

Blanche rose and moved toward the door.

"Where go you?"

"To my own room."

"You will not meet this man?"

"I will not."

"And you will not betray me until you have proof that I have been misinformed?"

"I will not."

"Oh, Miss Chamberlain, this has been a disagreeable task for me! I would have done everything rather than tell you this did I not consider it my duty to do so."

"You have indeed done your duty, if your information is true."

"There can be no mistake about my information, and I have placed myself in your hands. In doing my duty I fear the enmity of one of these men."

"You need not fear."

Blanche left the room and sought her own apartment, and the widow sailed down to the piazza to enjoy her triumph, and she muttered:

"He shall seek me now."

While the interview we have described was in progress, Frank Benson was pacing to and fro waiting the coming of his beautiful inamorata, but she came not. An hour passed, and still she did not come; another half hour passed, and he muttered:

"Her mother has detained her."

He still paced, when suddenly he saw a dark figure approaching, and he murmured:

"She comes!"

A moment, however, he discerned that it was the figure of a man, and later on recognized our Monte-Cristo. The latter approached and said, in his peculiar tone and manner:

"Well?"

"She has not come."

"She has not come, eh?"

"No."

"She will not come."

A suspicion flashed through our young lover's mind.

"You know she will not come?"

"I do."

"Will you tell me why?"

"Yes, I will."

"Do so."

"Come with me," said the Monte-Cristo, and he took the youth by the arm and led him away.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE two men walked to one of the rustic arbors and sat down, each lighting a cigar.

"Why did Blanche fail to keep her appointment?" asked Frank.

"I will not tell you at present; but she is a noble girl, and she has stood the test."

"It is strange you will say what you do, and not give me a full explanation."

"The full explanation will come."

A suspicion ran through the young man's mind. Lovers are jealous, and always ready to catch on to anything that will afford an excuse for a display of distrust, and the cause is the oversensitiveness of a genuine affection. Frank was angry to know that his friend possessed information that he would not impart.

"It is very singular," he said.

"What is very singular?"

"That you should know so much as concerns the motives and intentions of Miss Chamberlain, and still avow no acquaintanceship with her."

"I am simply a cool and dispassionate observer; you are a hot-headed lover, and incapable of judging either coolly or dispassionately."

"You said you knew why Miss Chamberlain did not meet me."

"I do."

"And you refuse to impart your information?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you frankly. I believe it will be better to let the affair work itself out, and I have but one thing to tell you: the widow will tell you her own story."

"Well?"

"You must not believe one word she says. Blanche is as true as steel—a dear, good girl; and if you had not mentioned her I would have told you all the facts."

"You possess all the facts?"

"I do."

"And she can satisfactorily explain her failure to meet me?"

"Not at present. She can not."

"She will seek to equivocate?"

"No."

"What will she do?"

"Avoid you altogether."

The youth gave a start, and exclaimed:

"Are you man or devil?"

"I am a gentleman; and devils are not usually on the side of truth and virtue. I am defending both. You must trust me, as you agreed to do."

"I fear one thing," suddenly exclaimed the youth.

"Well, what do you fear?"

"It looks very suspicious."

"What does?"

"I recall several facts."

"What are they?"

"You appear to know all that Mrs. Braisted says and does; you know also all she intends to do, so it appears, and yet you disclaim being acquainted with her."

"Well?"

"She also appears to know a great deal about you."

"Does she?"

"She does."

"Well?"

"It would seem—"

The young man hesitated, and the Monte-Cristo said:

"Proceed."

"I will speak out frankly. The idea is suggested that you are confederates."

The Monte-Cristo laughed, and said:

"I will admit what you say, but in truth I never spoke to the widow in my life. But I will speak to her; she and I must come to an understanding. In the meantime, I only ask you to have perfect confidence in the good faith and true love of Miss Chamberlain, and distrust every word the widow says to you. Come, does that look as though we're confederates?"

"I'm perplexed."

"You need not be. And so go; the widow awaits you. She has a wicked tale to tell, and all she tells you will be false. She is a wicked and dangerous woman, and it is lucky for you that I am aiding in the game we are playing against her."

"And how about Miss Chamberlain?"

"Just wait. All will come out well."

"There is one thing I regret."

"And what is that?"

"You have placed me in a false position."

"Have I?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"You told me to proclaim myself a millionaire."

"That is all right."

"I did so."

"Well?"

"The widow really believes my declaration true."

"That is all right. I will take care of that part of it."

"I will have no use for the ring now."

"Oh, yes, you will!"

"You had better receive it back, sir."

"No, keep it; you will need it very soon—sooner than you dream; and now go and meet the widow. She awaits you."

"In all fairness, will you tell me how it is you know the widow's intentions so well?"

"All the result of close observation."

Frank returned to the hotel and, sure enough, the widow was waiting for him, and she came right to him.

"I wish to speak to you," she said, and she pointed to a seat, and Frank prepared to listen as she seated herself beside him.

"I am your friend," she said, "although you are loath to believe it."

"How do you know I do not look upon you as a friend?"

"I know you do not; but I am about to prove my friendship, and also prove the fact that Miss Chamberlain has made a confidante of me. She was to have met you to-night."

The young man did not answer.

"She did not keep her appointment."

Still the youth remained silent.

"She came to me, told me of her appointment, and asked me a question. She asked me if I had heard the rumor as to your being a poor man. I told her I had. She asked me if I believed it."

The widow stopped, and the young man exclaimed, interrogatively:

"Well?"

"You had told me to strengthen the belief in your poverty."

"Yes."

"I told her I believed it true, and I told her I was fully satisfied of its truth."

"Well?"

"You should have seen what a change came over her then. She at once told me that she was on her way to keep an appointment with you. She said did she do so she would be in an awkward predicament, as she felt confident you intended to open the all-important subject; but she added: 'I have escaped, and I am thankful.'"

"What has she escaped?"

"A complication with a penniless lover, as she expressed it."

The apparent facts were on the widow's side. Probabilities tended to sustain her not improbable story, and the young man felt very uncomfortable, and his confidence in his friend was shaken, and our readers will remember that a man in love can not be held responsible for level-headed thinking. The smartest men on earth have been made fools of when in love.

Frank could not see how the widow could have gained the information so in accord with the seeming facts unless her tale was true.

"She considers she made an escape?" he said.

"Yes."

"Well, it is my opinion that it is I who made the escape."

CHAPTER XXVI.

HER eyes flashed on him and became radiant. She perceived that she had won, and she said:

"I wish I dare speak."

"Yes; speak."

"Frankly?"

"Yes."

"You have indeed made a mistake. Now mark my words: she will confirm all I have said; she will avoid you."

"She need not take the trouble."

"Why not?"

"I will not seek her."

"Now you talk like a man of spirit. I am proud of you—and yet it is possible—"

"What is possible?"

"She may seek to verify from your own lips the truth of the report."

"I shall confirm it."

"But she may put forces to work to learn the truth. She may learn that you are indeed rich."

"Well?"

"Then she will seek to explain her actions."

"Yes, she will, most assuredly."

"Well?"

"And then she may retaliate and vilify me, in order to save herself."

Frank was no fool, and he began to see through the widow's most excellent tactics. She was shrewd, but she was going too far. She had made her advance; she had gained the outer works, and she had set to fortify them, so as to hold all she had gained.

"She can never make satisfactory explanations to me if what you have just told should prove to be true."

"And do you still doubt my word?"

"I have not expressed any doubt."

At that moment there came an interruption, and the dialogue was brought to an end.

Later on the Monte-Cristo joined Frank.

"Well, you had a talk with the widow?"

"Yes."

"And she did what I refused to do—she explained why Miss Chamberlain did not meet you?"

"She did."

"Her explanation was as false as her own heart."

"How do you know what her explanation was, sir?"

"I know."

"You do?"

"I do; and you will certainly admit that I have had no opportunity to confer with her this time."

"That is true."

"And I will tell you just what she said."

"You will?"

"I will."

"Impossible!"

"I will tell you, almost word for word, just what she said."

"Do so."

"She said that Miss Chamberlain had heard the rumor of your lack of wealth."

The youth gave a start as the Monte-Cristo continued:

"She said Miss Chamberlain came to her to learn if the rumor was true or false."

"Yes, she did."

"Certainly; I know she did. She said that, acting under your advice, she confirmed the report, and that then Miss Chamberlain expressed her joy at her escape."

"I see it all," said Frank.

"Well, what do you see?"

"I am now convinced that you and the widow are confederates."

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"What leads you to that conclusion?"

"It is plain enough."

"Indeed, how?"

"You know just what she said."

"Yes."

"It's plain that you knew just what she was going to say."

Again the Monte-Cristo laughed, and said:

"That is good logic, and shows keen discernment. But you are mistaken."

"Then how is it you knew what she said?"

"It is because I know her so well—because I know her designs so well. I know just what she would be most likely to say. That is the secret of my knowledge. But now come, I've a bit of advice. You act the same to Miss Chamberlain as heretofore. Do not allude to her failure to meet you last night, and if she alludes to it, accept her explanation without question. I will bring matters to a conclusion within forty-eight hours, and I will have a surprise for you, the widow, and the parents of Miss Chamberlain. And now go to your room, and do not let the events of to-day disturb your rest. You are a lucky fellow, that is all."

Upon the day following the incidents we have described, the Monte-Cristo lay around in wait, and at length an opportunity offered—the opportunity he sought. Miss Chamberlain started to walk down upon the lawn. The mystery man followed her. He saw her enter a summer-house, and a few moments later she looked up from her book, and her face turned deathly pale as she saw the Monte-Cristo standing before her.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Chamberlain."

The lady rose and would have passed out, but the Monte-Cristo guarded the door.

"Do not go, miss."

"Sir, you are taking a great liberty!"

"I know I am, but it is in your interest."

"My interest, sir?"

"Yes."

There was a strange power about the Monte-Cristo. He possessed, as has been intimated, a wonderful magnetism, and there was an expression about his face and eyes that was truly fascinating. He exerted a spell when he so willed.

"You need not fear, miss. I have taken the liberty to address you in order to conserve your own happiness."

He spoke in the tones and with the respectful demeanor of a gentleman; but the lady was surprised all the same.

"You have an enemy, Miss Chamberlain—a bitter, relentless, and remorseless enemy."

"Sir!" ejaculated the lady.

"I speak truly, miss. The enemy is seeking to wreck the future happiness of your life. I propose that this enemy shall not succeed."

"You are using strange language, sir."

"I propose to advance the most positive proofs."

"Who can this enemy be, sir?"

"You shall learn in the most positive and convincing manner."

"I do not understand."

"But you shall. I have a request to make in your own behalf. You are a young lady of courage."

"Thank you, sir."

"I desire that you come to this summer-house alone at exactly nine o'clock to-night."

"Sir!" ejaculated Miss Chamberlain.

"I know it is a most singular request to come from a stranger."

"It is indeed, and I shall not pay any attention to it."

"Oh, yes, you will! Yes, you will come!"

The young lady gazed in amazement, and the Monte-Cristo met her gaze with a look so persuasive and yet so quizzical she was completely disconcerted.

"You assume a great deal, sir."

"I do."

"How dare you!"

"I know you have a bitter enemy, as I told you. I know you have received false information. I know a false tale has been poured into your ears. I know that one who is in every way entitled to your respect has lost it, and the loss has been occasioned by a venomous woman who has deliberately lied. I use no milder term."

"Sir, this is very strange."

"I know it is."

"You speak of Mrs. Braisted?"

"I do."

"How do you know that she told me anything?"

"It is true?"

"Yes, it is true."

"Never mind how I discovered the fact. Let me prove her stories false."

CHAPTER XXVII.

"CAN you prove her statements false?"

"I can."

"Will you tell me, sir, how you became aware that she had made any statements?"

"It is not needful that I should; it is sufficient that I know she has made false statements; and, I repeat, all that is required is to prove her false."

"Can you do it, sir?"

"I can."

"How?"

"I propose to prove them false by her own lips."

"Impossible, sir."

"Will you come here to-night at nine?"

"For what purpose?"

"I am to have an interview with Mrs. Braisted. I propose to tax her with her perfidy, and compel her to admit to me the falsity of all she told you."

"May I ask one more question, sir?"

"Certainly."

"What leads you to resort to this method?"

"To vindicate a young gentleman whom I have learned to love."

"And why do you seek to bring about this vindication before me?"

"Because to you the false statements were made."

"And you really know what the statements were?"

"I do."

"And you pronounce them false?"

"I do."

"What need to tax her with them?"

"There is need. She is a wicked and vindictive woman."

"But, I pray you, do not accuse her of having told me what was false."

"Ah! I remember you made her a promise. You fear she will suspect that you have broken your promise."

"It is true."

"You need have no fear. I will inform her as to how I became acquainted with all the facts; and even if otherwise, you need not fear. You remember she said she feared my

enmity. Now, I know that she told these falsehoods, so the dread from an exposure must be met. And the information did not come from you. I can say you have not broken your promise."

"I have not."

"Will you come here to-night?"

"I hardly dare promise."

"You must promise. Much depends upon your hearing what passes."

"I fear that woman."

"You will have no need to fear her after to-night. She is a dangerous woman, but her power to injure you will be gone. Listen: she vilified a certain gentleman."

"She did, if her statements concerning him are false."

"They are false. But listen: Do not you think that when she would vilify him to you she must have vilified you to him?"

Miss Chamberlain turned pale.

"She has done so."

"What has she said?"

"Shall I tell?"

"Certainly."

"You desire me to tell just what she said?"

"I do."

"Remember, I will prove my statements from her own lips. She has always been your enemy, ever since she first made your acquaintance."

"I admit I felt an instinctive aversion toward her."

"And your aversion was well founded."

"What did she say about me?"

"She said you were engaged to be married."

"It's false."

"She said you believed Mr. Benson to be a rich man, and that you had set out to catch him; and if you succeeded you would throw the other gentleman over."

Miss Chamberlain's face was like that of a corpse.

"Is it possible?" she ejaculated.

"It is true."

"And to whom did she tell this?"

"Mr. Frank Benson."

"And he believed it?"

"No; and yet you were ready to believe her malignant statements concerning him; and there was less probability in her statements concerning him than there was in those concerning you."

Miss Chamberlain colored, but said:

"Who could suspect that a lady would tell such terrible falsehoods?"

"Yes, the monstrous supposition is an excuse; few would believe that a lady could tell such fearful falsehoods."

"And all her statements are false?"

"As false concerning Mr. Benson as they were concerning you. And now I desire that you will promise to come down here to-night; you need not fear."

"I will come."

"Say nothing to any one, but come."

"I will."

"And please avoid an explanation with Mr. Benson until after you have overheard what passes here."

The young lady's face became scarlet, as, in a low tone, she said:

"I will promise."

The Monte-Cristo left the summer-house and strolled up toward the hotel. He ascended the steps, and walked along the piazza, and soon came face to face with Mrs. Braisted. The widow glanced at him scornfully, but she turned pale when the Monte-Cristo stepped up to her, and said:

"Madame, I must have a few word with you."

"Sir!" exclaimed the widow.

"I said I must."

"How dare you!"

"Oh, I am a daring man!"

"Indeed, you are, and I will see that your impertinence is properly punished."

"Oh, no, you will not! Listen: I want to have a long talk with you. Meet me in the summer-house to-night at a quarter to nine o'clock."

"How dare you, sir!"

"Oh, I am a daring man!"

"I shall summon Mr. ——."

Mr. —— was the proprietor of the hotel.

"Summon him, madame, and I rather think he will advise you to meet me."

The widow glared in blank astonishment.

"I must see you. I have named the place and time. You be there, or you will regret it."

"You threaten me, sir?"

"Yes, I threaten you, and I will keep my threat."

"Who are you?"

"I will explain to-night when we meet."

"I shall not meet you!"

"Oh, yes, you will!" said the Monte-Cristo, and raising his hat in the most graceful manner, he sauntered away.

The widow stood gazing after him. Her face was deathly white, and her eyes betrayed the terror that was in her heart.

"Who can it be? What does it all mean?" she murmured, as she slowly turned and walked in an opposite direction from that taken by the Monte-Cristo.

That same afternoon there was great excitement in the hotel. A gentleman who was known as a great millionaire had arrived at the hotel. The gentleman was a power in Wall Street. He was one of the richest men in the land, and, of course, he was the hero of the hour.

During the afternoon, when the gentleman came upon the piazza and was the cynosure of all eyes, there was great astonishment when he advanced and cordially shook hands with the mysterious Mr. Alka, and the wonderment continued when it became apparent that the two gentlemen were close friends. Even Frank Benson was taken aback. He did not understand it, and the mystery that surrounded his new friend deepened.

Later in the afternoon the Monte-Cristo introduced Frank to the great millionaire, and the latter was heard to say, to the guests' increased astonishment, that he "was proud to make the acquaintance of a friend of Mr. Alka."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

At nine o'clock to the minute the Monte-Cristo entered the summer-house. It was a beautiful night, well suited for the sweet and pleasant communion of lovers, or for confidential whisperings of any sort.

Our singular hero had been in the summer-house but a few minutes, puffing away at his cigar, when he heard the rustle of silk, and a moment later Mrs. Braisted stood before him. She looked truly queenly as she stood with her really handsome eyes fixed upon the strange man who had commanded her presence.

"Ah! you here?" said the Monte-Cristo.

"I am here, sir, at your request."

"Be seated."

"I beg your pardon; I can listen standing to any communication you have to make."

"I desire that you take a seat."

"And I refuse to do so."

"You will get very tired before our conference is at an end."

"I shall remain but a moment, sir."

"Oh, no; you will remain some time!"

"You assume a very imperative tone toward me, sir."

"Yes, I do."

"I have humored your singular behavior, but you may go too far."

"As far as you have gone, eh?"

The Monte-Cristo spoke in a quiet and firm manner.

"Will you explain why you asked me to come here?"

"I will; but I would prefer that you take a seat."

"I will not."

"I am sorry—very sorry."

"Why?"

"Because you compel me to rise, and I would prefer to sit, but can not do so while a lady is standing."

The widow took a seat in a nonchalant way, remarking:

"I suppose I must humor you, since I have come here merely to gratify my own curiosity."

"You came to gratify your own curiosity?"

"I did."

"No other motive impelled you?"

"No, sir."

The Monte-Cristo was talking to the widow, but his glance was all the time furtively cast through into space between the lattice-work and the vines. At length he saw a dark figure come stealing round the summer-house; it approached quite near and crouched behind a tree in close proximity to the summer-house—indeed close enough to hear all that might pass between the speakers within the arbor.

"Your curiosity shall be fully gratified."

"Thank you."

"But first I desire to ask you a few questions."

"I will not answer any questions. I came here to listen to your revelation, not to make any."

"Madame, you will answer my questions."

"Sir, you are really insulting. I will not submit to further insult."

"I am not insulting."

"Your manner is decidedly so."

"You will answer my questions, all the same."

"I shall go away."

"Oh, no!"

The widow attempted to rise.

"One moment, madame. What is the nature of your animosity toward me?"

"Animosity toward you, sir?"

"Yes."

"You assume a great deal."

"Do I?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"In assuming that I have any interest in you."

"Ah, you have no interest in me?"

"None whatever."

"But you know who I am?"

"I do not."

"Can it be possible you have forgotten who I am?"

The Monte-Cristo spoke in a slow manner, and emphasized each word.

"I know nothing about you. I never knew you, sir. I never heard of you. I never saw you until I saw you here."

"Can it be possible, madame, that you can make such a declaration?"

"It is the truth."

"You know nothing about me?"

"Nothing."

"You never heard of me until you saw me here?"

"Never."

"It is strange."

"Why, sir, is it strange?"

"Because your present declaration is such a remarkable admission."

"Remarkable admission, sir?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Simply because it is a calm and deliberate confession that you told a lie!"

"How dare you!" cried the widow, adding: "You will be made to render an account for these insults to a defenseless lady!"

"But you will render an account first. Madame, when you say you do not know me, that you never saw or heard of me, you tell what is false."

"I positively declare I know nothing about you; that I never saw you until you came here; that I never heard of you."

The Monte-Cristo was skillfully leading the lady into a trap, as our readers have already discerned.

"Madame, you will forgive me if I speak plainly?"

"I will not forgive your insulting language."

"I shall speak plainly all the same. If what you say is true, your present declaration is in painful contradiction to a statement you made concerning me."

"A statement I made concerning you?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last night."

"To whom?"

"Miss Chamberlain. You told that lady I was a swindler, a common ruffian. You lied then or you lie now. I use strong terms because your conduct merits the strongest language. You have admitted you lied about me; now how much truth was there in your statement concerning my young friend, Frank Benson?"

The widow's face was like that of a ghost. She saw that she had been led into a trap, and what angered her most was the suspicion that Miss Chamberlain had repeated her statements.

"I deny ever having made any such statements concerning you, sir."

"You do?"

"I do."

"And did you not tell Miss Chamberlain that Frank Benson was a gambler and associate of thieves?"

"I did not."

"You positively deny that you made these statements?"

"I do."

"You did not tell Miss Chamberlain I was a common swindler?"

"I did not."

"You did not tell her that Frank Benson was a gambler?"

"I did not."

"You positively declare that you did not?"

"I do."

"Then, madame, you compel me to declare that you did make these charges."

"If Miss Chamberlain has stated that I made any such charges, she has told an untruth."

"Miss Chamberlain has not said that you made any such statements."

"Then how do you know I made them?"

"I do know it."

"Of your own knowledge?"

"Yes."

"It is false?"

"No, madame, you certainly made the declarations."

"Miss Chamberlain is a scandalous woman to have said that I did."

"Miss Chamberlain has never said that you did."

"The false information came from her."

"No, madame."

"Then why do you accuse me?"

"Shall I tell you?"

"Yes."

"I heard you make the statements."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE widow trembled with rage.

"It's false!" she asseverated.

"No; it is true."

"How dare you!"

"I can prove my charge. I listened at your door, madame. I heard every word you said when making your false and scandalous revelations to Miss Chamberlain."

"You were listening?"

"I was, and I will tell you why. I knew you were a dangerous woman. I desired to save a pure and noble girl from being harmed by you, and I listened to save her. And now I command you to admit that your statements were false."

"I will not."

"You will not?"

"No, sir."

"You have already done so, in fact."

"I believe them to be true. I spoke from mere suspicion, but I am satisfied my suspicions were correct. And now let me tell you, sir, you can not intimidate me. I do not fear you, and I will have you sent from this hotel."

"You will?"

"I will."

"Why?"

"Because you are no gentleman."

"And you will have me sent away?"

"I will."

"I guess not, madame; but you will confess that you deliberately and knowingly stated what was false."

"I will not."

"You will also admit that you have been making false statements all along. Your statement to Frank Benson was false when you told him that Miss Chamberlain was engaged to be married."

"I never told him so."

"You never did?"

"I never did."

"One more question: Do you know the statement to be true?"

"I never made it."

"Will you deny ever having made the statement in his presence?"

"I will."

"And you will have me turned from this hotel?"

"I will."

"On the contrary, madame, you will leave to-morrow."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. I command you to leave this hotel. I have convicted you of having told several falsehoods, and now I tell you to leave this hotel to-morrow, at the latest."

"How dare you?"

"Oh, I am one of those fellows who dare anything! You have wrought all the mischief you can here, and you had better go."

"You do not know me, sir. I see you are a scheming man. I give you credit for much address and cunning, but I defy you!"

"You defy me?"

"I do."

"That is because you do not know who I am—you do not know my power."

"Your power?" repeated the widow, in a taunting tone.

"Yes, my power."

"I laugh at your power and your devices."

"You will be asking mercy in a moment."

"From you?"

"Yes."

"Never! I laugh at you. It is a game between us, but I will win. You may think you have the winning cards, but you will learn soon enough that you overrate your cunning."

"I will, eh?"

"You will."

"Madame, I have a revelation to make."

"Indeed! You have made quite a number."

"All true ones, and very unpalatable to you; but I have a stunner to come."

"You have?"

"I have."

"I listen."

"You are ready?"

"I am ready."

Both spoke in "lighter tone."

"You claim to be rich."

The widow winced.

"I know just how rich you are."

"Indeed! Is it any of your business?"

"Yes; I was compelled to learn."

"You were?"

"Yes."

"May I ask why?"

"Certainly."

"I do."

"I hold a note made by you, and indorsed by the gentleman who arrived at the hotel to-day."

A cry burst from the widow's lips resembling a wail of anguish.

"You hold that note?" she demanded, in a husky voice.

"I do."

"Who are you?"

"You said I was a swindler, but this note would declare that you are not the proper person to make such a charge."

"You hold that note?"

"I do."

"Have you betrayed me?"

"I have not."

"You hold my secret?"

"I do."

"I will buy that note."

"When?"

"Now."

"How?"

"I will deposit my jewels with you."

"That note calls for money, not jewels."

"I appeal to your mercy."

"I am sorry for you, madame."

"And you will spare me?"

"I will."

"On your honor?"

"Yes, provided you act honorably and earn my compassion."

"What can I do?"

"I have said I was sorry for you. I will say more: I know all about you."

"And you will not betray me?"

"I will promise conditionally. Mark well my words. You have been a wicked woman, but you are a woman naturally possessed of a good heart. It is possible you have learned a lesson."

"I have."

"And you will profit by it?"

"I will. Shall I go to Miss Chamberlain and confess I told her a falsehood?"

"No, you need not."

"Will you tell me who you are?"

"No."

"Let me recall the evil things I said about you."

"No, it is not necessary. What you said about me can not harm me. It only harmed yourself. All evil and scandalous lies recoil upon the utterer of them. A person can not do and say what you have done and said without in time facing the recoil."

"Have you betrayed me to Mr. —?"

"I have not."

"And you will keep my secret?"

"I will."

"And permit me to redeem that note?"

"You will leave here to-morrow?"

"I will do as you bid."

"Then you will get a telegram and be called suddenly away."

"I will go."

"Then you can rely upon my honor that the note will never turn up in judgment against you."

"You will permit me to redeem it?"

"I will make you a present of it the day it comes due."

"Sir!"

"Yes, I mean what I say."

"Why do you give me this amount?"

"Because I choose to do so."

"Can you afford it?"

"That is my business. And now you can go, and you need have no fear."

"But Miss Chamberlain?"

"I will undeceive her after you have gone."

"You are a noble man."

"Then may you become a noble woman."

"I will try."

"You will?"

"I will."

"If you try you will succeed, and you will become an honor to your sex; and, besides, you will find a firm and true friend in me."

"Will you tell me who you are?"

"No; but I will appear to you some day and we will resume this conversation where we conclude it now. Madame, I bid you good-night."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE Monte-Cristo had seen the dark figure crawl away, and he concluded his conversation with the widow and departed from the arbor, and a moment later the widow also slowly walked out. She had been matched—she had been beaten—she was a bitterly disappointed woman. At heart she was not bad, but a love of show had shadowed over her better qualities. She had swum into the vortex of fashionable life, and once in the giddy stream she went whirling along like the rest; and this love of show is a terrible source of evil; and it is a remarkable fact how many allurements the devil has to win souls from goodness and transform them into ministering spirits of evil.

The love of show and the love of fashion are the most hardening of influences; and there is more cold-blooded cruelty and wickedness practiced under the pressure of fashion than under almost any other motive for evil save that of rum.

Fashion, flashing, glittering, fair,

Bitterness concealing,

Beguiler of time, destroyer of care,

Deadener of feeling.

The widow had learned, indeed, a bitter lesson. All her well-laid plans had come to naught, and all her wicked scandals had recoiled upon herself, *as they usually do*.

One mystery she could not explain, and that was how this mysterious man who had checkmated her knew so much concerning her movements. We will explain to our readers the mystery she could not solve.

In the first place the Monte-Cristo had kept the widow under close surveillance. He suspected she would attempt some deep and malignant scheme, and his eye was upon her when she followed Blanche and drew her to her room.

The happiness of two people were at stake. Our Monte-Cristo felt himself justified in adopting any measures to circumvent her schemes, and he did not hesitate to assume the

rôle of a detective and follow her to her room, and he overheard all that passed. And it was he who fell against the door at a critical moment, so as to create a diversion and prevent Miss Chamberlain from making a rash promise.

The discovery of the forged note was accidental. Our readers will remember the fact of the appearance at the hotel of a great millionaire. The latter had our hero's full confidence. It was necessary that he should have several well-known gentlemen in his confidence, and the great millionaire was one of them; and when the banker arrived the Monte-Cristo made himself known.

The millionaire was an old friend of the widow's husband, and he had a slight acquaintance with Mrs. Braisted herself; and while talking to the Monte-Cristo he saw the widow come upon the piazza. He went and spoke to her and, later on, returning to our hero, said:

"Do you know that lady?"

"I have not the honor of her acquaintance."

"I feel sorry for her," said the great banker.

Our Monte-Cristo's curiosity was aroused, and he said:

"She is very rich, I am told."

"Rich!" ejaculated the banker.

"Yes; I've been told her husband left her a very comfortable fortune."

"She is practically penniless. I am sorry for her. At heart she is a very nice woman. She was well reared; but, unfortunately, she is very ambitious to shine as a society star, and that ambition will in the end cause her ruin; already it has led her into a crime."

"A crime!" exclaimed the Monte-Cristo.

"Yes."

"Please explain."

"I do not know as it would be fair."

"Yes; I have particular reasons for wishing to know all about it."

"You will keep the secret?"

"Certainly."

"She has been speculating in Wall Street, and, like most of the women speculators, she got on to the wrong side of the market. She was in great trouble. She needed money, hoping to save herself. She was known as an acquaintance of mine, and she forged my name as an indorsement to a note."

"She forged your name?"

"Yes."

"For a large amount?"

"For one thousand dollars. The note was brought to me after it had been negotiated. I recognized that the signature was a forgery."

"And what did you do?"

"I acknowledged the signature."

"Good! And does she know that you did?"

"No. It is my intention to take up the note if she fails to pay it, and then I will give her a warning that may save her from all future attempts in that direction."

Our readers can readily guess an explanation followed, and our hero made good use of the information with the consent of his friend.

That same night Frank Benson sat alone upon the piazza. It was a beautiful night, indeed a glorious night. The young man was in an unpleasant frame of mind, when suddenly a lady approached. She took a seat beside the youth who, with a smile, recognized Miss Chamberlain.

"I owe you an apology, Mr. Benson."

"No, no!"

"Yes; I did not keep my appointment last night, and if you are not too greatly offended with me, we will take the stroll to-night."

Frank was on his feet in a moment and offering his arm to the lady. They walked along the balcony toward the steps. It was after ten o'clock, but the piazza was thronged, as there was a german in progress in the parlors of the hotel.

As they descended the steps they met Mrs. Braisted, who volunteered a haughty recognition, and for a moment the fires of a bitter hatred burned in her heart. She looked back at the young couple, and her eyes glared, and at that moment a voice whispered:

"It's all right; some day you will be happy."

The widow turned and recognized the Monte-Cristo standing beside her.

"Are you to become my shadow?" she said.

"No; you go away to-morrow; I will not follow you."

The color came to the lady's face.

"And must I go?"

"Yes."

"Let me remain, please," she pleaded.

"No; you must go."

"Why?"

"It is better."

"You need not fear me further."

"Alas, it is in the kindest spirit I insist upon your going; it is to spare you!"

"Dare you claim to be kind to me?"

"Certainly. Some day you will look upon me as a real friend."

"Ah, I see; you will hold your secret as a menace over me!"

"I have but one answer to make to that charge: I am a gentleman."

"And my enemy."

"No; I have really saved you against yourself. I am not your enemy; I am your friend."

"And yet you cover me with disgrace!"

"How?"

"By driving me from here. How will I account for my sudden departure?"

"I have arranged for that."

"You have arranged for that, sir?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"In the morning a telegram will be brought to you, summoning you to New York immediately."

"You lay your plans well."

"I do."

"What are you—man or devil?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE Monte-Cristo had a weakness. He was mortal, and consequently not perfect by any means; and one of his weaknesses was an inordinate love of the mysterious. He delighted in being looked upon as some weird monster or adroit devil, possessed of supernatural powers, and when the widow exclaimed, "Are you man or devil?" he smiled. He enjoyed his little game, and said:

"Whatever I am, remember I am inexorable as concerns the happiness of those young people going down there, and see to it that you attempt no more interruptions of their happiness."

"The day may come when I will be able to make you feel as I feel now."

"Ah, then you feel bitterly toward me?"

"Have you not deeply humiliated me?"

"And you intend to retaliate some day?"

"It is possible. I may bring you down from your high estate some day."

"Very well. Possibly you may. I have a feeling that you and I may meet again, and it is well that we should recall our present singular association. Take this, and when you see one wearing a companion ring, you will know where to strike."

The widow uttered a cry of amazement. The Monte-Cristo tendered her a ring set with gems of such rare beauty and brilliancy that they shone like glittering balls of fire under her eyes. She recoiled, and said:

"What do you mean?"

"See, I have two of them."

"They are rings of rare value!"

"Yes, madame; either one of them is worth four times the amount of your off-color note."

"And you mean to give me one of those rings?"

"I do."

"Why should you?"

"So you will recognize me some day, and know where to strike. You must know that you might meet me to-morrow, and not know that you had ever seen me before."

"Ah! I see; you are under a disguise."

"I will admit that I am."

"I regret my threat."

"Oh, you need not!"

"I would prefer, if possible, that you should be a friend."

"I will never do a harm to the possessor of that ring."

"And you desire me to accept it?"

"I do."

The widow could not resist. She had never seen such a beautiful ring in all her life.

"You will go to-morrow?"

"I am your slave," she said, with a merry laugh.

"Ah! that is right. Again good-night."

The Monte-Cristo walked off down the graveled path, when suddenly he heard the rustling of silk. He walked on, but in a moment a hand was laid lightly on his arm. He turned and stood face to face with Ella Dickerson. She looked really beautiful as she stood before him.

"Ah, sir, we have met again!" said Ella, in a tone of deep agitation.

"This is Miss Dickerson. You do me great honor when you claim to have met me before."

"Will you walk with me?"

"Certainly; can I refuse?"

The two walked on a short distance, and Miss Dickerson said:

"You are the man of mystery?"

"Indeed, miss, you speak in riddles."

"You can not deceive me."

"I will not try."

"You are the Black Knight."

The Monte-Cristo laughed.

"You flatter me," he said.

"I recognize you."

"I am Mr. Alka, miss—Mr. Alka only."

"Did I not see you talking to Mrs. Braisted?"

"You did."

"Did I not see you give her a ring—one of those strange, wonderful gems such as I possess, and which I owe to your bounty?"

"Miss Dickerson, you are speaking in riddles."

The lady came to a halt. The moon was shining out bright and clear. She looked our hero straight in the face.

"Do you deny your identity?"

"I deny having the honor of your acquaintance."

"Can it be possible that I have made a mistake?" said Ella.

"It is very probable that you have made a mistake, miss."

"You will not mention my mistake?"

"Certainly not."

"I have a mysterious friend. I was led to suspect that you were that friend."

"Would I were!"

"You will forget, sir, that I addressed you?"

"Certainly."

"Good-night."

The lady moved away in a stately manner.

The Monte-Cristo followed her with his eye, and muttered:

"She is not deceived. Some deep scheme has entered her head. She has spoken to me, and thereby carried out a design. She would now mislead me. Well, well; it's a new game I shall be called upon to play now!"

A moment the Monte-Cristo ceased speaking. His eyes followed the beautiful woman, and, after an interval, he resumed:

"Ah! how beautiful she is, and how I loved her once! Would that she had proved as true as she is lovely; for as I live, take her all in all, she is the most beautiful woman I ever met. And she is so bright; she possesses so rare a mind! But, alas! love of display has destroyed her; a false education has made a mere soulless statue of her who might have been among the loveliest women on earth."

Ella Dickerson walked away; and she, too, indulged a little involuntary muttering:

"Why is he here—and why is he here under this strange disguise? He thinks he has deceived me—that he has misled me. But no; I recognized him. And now I can account for that strange interest I felt in him before my suspicions were aroused concerning his identity. But I will act now; I will know who that man is. I will watch him as man was never watched before; I will play his own game. He is an expert at disguises; I will try what I can do under a disguise. I am a mimic; I can change my appearance. I will; and, as I live, I will know who that man is! Yes, I will play at his own game!"

Miss Dickerson and Mrs. Braisted were well acquainted. The widow had entered the parlor after her strange interview with our hero, and her vanity was so great she put on the ring she had received under such singular circumstances, and its brilliancy attracted almost immediate attention; and when asked concerning it the widow merely said:

"Oh, it is an old family heir-loom that I seldom wear."

There was a weirdness about the ring that appeared to create such unusual interest. There were many rare gems worn by ladies in the circle, but among them all there was no such strange, weird stones as glittered in the ring upon the widow's finger.

Ella Dickerson entered the parlor and approached the circle of ladies just as the widow made the statement that the ring was a family heir-loom, and, taking a seat near the widow, she fixed a keen glance upon her face, as she remarked:

"It is strange you would keep such a rare jewel hidden."

"To tell the truth, I am afraid to wear it."

"Why?"

"It always attracts so much attention. It is a weird sort of a jewel."

"Yes," said Ellen, "and I possess one of the same character."

CHAPTER XXXII.

MRS. BRAISTED was a quick-witted woman, and she saw something in Ella's manner and recognized something in her voice that was suggestive of purpose in her questions.

The widow sought to change the subject, and after a moment withdrew from the circle.

Ella also withdrew and followed Mrs. Braisted. The latter strolled out to the piazza, and walked along to that portion which overlooked the river.

It was, as stated, a magnificent night. The widow stood leaning over the rail, looking down upon the river, and was lost in a deep reverie, when she was aroused by a voice remarking:

"How weirdly your ring gleams under the moonlight!"

Mrs. Braisted started. It was Mrs. Dickerson who stood by her side.

"You appear to be greatly interested in my ring."

"I am. Did I not tell you I had one much like it."

"Indeed!"

"You do not appear anxious to see my ring."

"I should be delighted."

Ella removed her glove and held up her hand, and a jewel shone upon her finger set with gems that possessed the same cold, weird gleam that distinguished the widow's present.

"Yours is a beautiful ring."

"Yes; and do you know that the gems in these rings came from a particular mine?"

"Indeed!"

"And but one person in America possesses those gems?"

"Indeed!"

"You said yours was an old family heir-loom?"

"Yes, it is."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Braisted, but your statement can not be correct."

"Miss Dickerson, what do you mean?"

"You did not possess that ring before to-night."

"How dare you!"

"I tell the truth and you know it."

"You are very spiteful."

"No, I do not desire to be spiteful. I only wish to warn you."

"How warn me?"

"You do not dream what the possession of that ring entails?"

"How strangely you talk!"

"There is a property as weird connected with your ring, as is pronounced as its weird gleam and singular glitter."

"How do you know?"

"See here!"

Miss Dickerson pointed to her own strangely glittering gem.

"Miss Dickerson, you are not merely speculating, you are not guessing, you are not talking at random. There is meaning in every word you speak. What do you mean?"

"That ring was a present to you."

"Certainly."

"From a gentleman."

"How do you know it is a present from a gentleman?"

"I know there is a certain gentleman who has a strange fancy for giving rings like the one you wear. When making appointments for future unannounced meetings he assumes disguises, but he holds the companion ring, and can always make himself known to the owner of the gift ring. That ring was given to you under like circumstances."

"You were a listener?"

"I was not."

"Then how dare you make such statements?"

"I recognize the ring."

"And yours?"

"It came in a mysterious manner, and since I have worn it evil has followed me."

The widow turned pale.

"Will you explain?"

"I will, on one condition."

"And what is your condition?"

"You shall be perfectly frank with me."

"I will."

"That ring was given to you by a gentleman?"

"It was."

"Under peculiar circumstances?"

"Yes."

"You had no previous acquaintance with the donor?"

"My acquaintance with the gentleman is slight."

"Mr. Alka gave you the ring?"

The widow made no answer.

"I know he did."

"And did he give the ring to you?"

"No."

"You said but one person owned rings like yours and mine besides ourselves."

"That is true."

"And you deny that Mr. Alka gave you the one you possess?"

"I do."

"How do you reconcile the two statements?"

"First answer me a question: What do you know about Mr. Alka?"

"Frankly, nothing."

"And yet you have accepted a ring from him?"

"I did as a pledge; the ring is but a loan."

"And you really do not know anything about Mr. Alka?"

"I do not."

"Mr. Alka is but an agent."

The widow gave a start.

"His master gave me my ring, and he must have directed the ring you possess to be given to you."

"Who is his master?"

"Ah! you would like to know?"

"I would."

"I will tell you on one condition."

"Again, name your condition."

"Under what circumstances was that ring given to you?"

"I can not answer."

"You need not fear."

"I do not fear, but I can not answer."

"You mean you will not?"

"I will not."

"Then I shall withhold the information."

"As you choose."

"But I warn you."

"What have I to fear?"

"Much."

"But will you specify?"

"I can not. All I know is that evil comes like a shadow with that ring. It did to me, it will to you."

"Are you acquainted with Mr. Alka?"

"I am not."

"Then how is it you make the statement you do?"

"I merely follow indices; and you can see how clearly I have done so by merely seeing that ring in your possession. I have been able to tell you under what circumstances you received it."

"That is so."

"You and I should become friends."

"Why?"

"Because of the possession of these rings. We come under the shadow of the same mystery, the same weird and evil influence."

"You fear evil?"

"I do."

"In what form has it come to you?"

"In various forms, and more particularly in the way of continued disappointments."

"Why do you not throw the jewel away?"

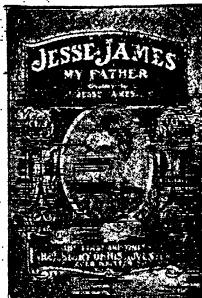
"Because I desire to solve the mystery."

"Will you succeed?"

"I may; and you can help me."

"How?"

"You are a bright woman—together we can entrap this man, and find out who he is and what is his purpose."



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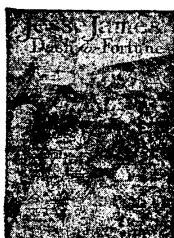
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